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interzone

interzone

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Nina Allan The Silver Wind

a novella with art by Ben Baldwin

plus stories by Tim Lees
Chris Butler and Ray Cluley

art by Russell Morgan and Paul Drummond

Paolo Bacigalupi

interviewed by Jim Steel

PRINTED IN THE UK



DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK *news* • BOOK ZONE *book reviews*
NICK LOWE'S MUTANT POPCORN + TONY LEE'S LASER FODDER *films*

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FICTION



COVER ART

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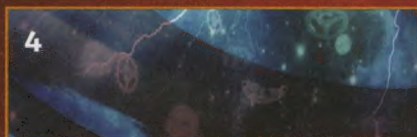


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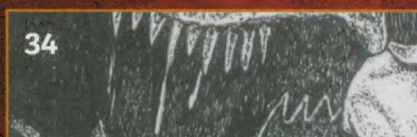
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READERS' POLL: DON'T FORGET TO VOTE!

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The Cheshire Cat's Grin

Looking back over the interviews we've done about our work on *Interzone* there are a handful of themes, issues and people who crop up in every conversation. One of these is Nina Allan.

The power of Nina's dreams and nightmares comes from her bravura blending of the astonishing and the quotidian. Her people, places and events are so beautifully specific. This genius for behavioural nuance and telling detail is evident throughout Nina's work: it's there in 'Monsters' (*The Third Alternative* #39), in the strange and unsettling 'The Upstairs Window' (*Interzone* #230), in the emotionally charged 'My Brother's Keeper' (*Black Static* #12), and it's a key element in 'Wilkolak', her contribution to *Crimewave* 11: *Ghosts* – one of her most accomplished and gripping stories to date.

You'll have gathered from the publications mentioned that it isn't merely the quality and power of Nina's work that impresses, it's the range. She's comfortable in a range of genres and, many would argue, she's developing into one of the finest contemporary exponents of the short story form.

In our recent interview with Jason Sanford he singled Nina out as a one of the most inventive and talented contemporary writers of sf and fantasy; and on his blog has described one of her *Interzone* stories, 'Flying in the Face of God', as "sublime". For writer and editor Claire Massey, Nina's work is captivating because she blends philosophical and scientific speculation with a compassionate and enigmatic take on the human condition.

For us, the emotional and intellectual resonance of Nina's writing is a bit like the Cheshire Cat's grin. Long after you've put her stories aside there's an enigma, a feeling or a vague sense of psychological disturbance that lingers. We're sure you'll enjoy 'The Silver Wind'; it's an utterly compelling story by a writer at the top of her game.

'Flying in the Face of God' (#227) is one of two *Interzone* stories shortlisted for the 2010 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction, the other being Aliette de Bodard's 'The Shipmaker' from #231. Congratulations and good luck to both, and to other contenders Peter Watts and Neil Williamson.

Don't forget that you only have until the end of March to vote in the *Interzone* Readers' Poll. As well as email and forum, you now also have the option of using the form in the *Interzone* section of the website.

ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD



As Others Avoid Us. The BBC's *Outcasts* takes place on a distant colonised world:

"But don't call it sci-fi, which is pretty much a banned word on set," warns the *Daily Mail*. Set designer James North explains: "Sci-fi has its own dedicated TV channel, and the BBC doesn't want to give the impression it's putting out a sci-fi show on prime-time BBC1." If it's not sf, then what? "This is futuristic drama with the focus on pioneering humans who, out of necessity, just happen to be living on a planet that isn't Earth." Series creator Ben Richards nervously adds: "...an alien planet without scary monsters. Little green men and fearsome creatures isn't what *Outcasts* is about at all."

Award Shortlists (novels only). BSFA: Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl*; Lauren Beukes, *Zoo City*; Ken Macleod, *The Restoration Game*; Ian McDonald, *The Dervish House*; Tricia Sullivan, *Lightborn*. • Nebulas: M.K. Hobson, *The Native Star*; N.K. Jemisin, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*; Mary Robinette Kowal, *Shades of Milk and Honey*; Jack McDevitt, *Echo*; Nnedi Okorafor, *Who Fears Death*; Connie Willis, *Blackout/All Clear*.

Toy Story. One of Hasbro's *Transformers* models in the 'Power Core Combiners' range was deemed unsuitable for UK release owing to its evocative name: 'Spastic with Stunticons'. (*The Register*)

H.G. Wells, in a recently unearthed 1934 letter, scorned an offer from his home town: "Bromley has not been particularly gracious to me nor I to Bromley and I

don't think I want to add the freedom of Bromley to the freedom of the City of London and the freedom of the City of Brussels – both of which I have." This letter is now proudly displayed in Bromley Museum. (*Independent*)

Honours. Alan Garner was made an honorary Doctor of Letters by the University of Warwick; Jack Ketchum (pseudonym of Dallas Mayr) is the 2011 World Horror Convention Grand Master for life achievement; Christopher Lee received a BAFTA Fellowship at this year's awards; Terry Pratchett won the American Library Association's Margaret Edwards award for life achievement in YA fiction.

Vox Pop. "Which legendary king owned a magic sword called Excalibur?" Alleged Celebrity: "Herod." (*Celebrity Mastermind*, BBC1)

As Others See Us. Film review: "After all, isn't science fiction supposed to be barmy? [...] *Tron: Legacy* is a Walt Disney sequel targeted at hippies whose shelves are piled with Isaac Asimov paperbacks." (*Independent*)

Magazine E-Scene. *Analog* now accepts, indeed prefers, electronic story submissions via analog. magazinesubmissions.com. • *Locus* began e-publishing its full content from issue 600, January 2011.

We Are Everywhere, Unfortunately. Let's hope that US profiling of potential lunatic gunmen doesn't focus on the genre content of Jared Loughner's reading list: "Among the books that he would later cite as his favorites: *Animal Farm*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Mein Kampf* and *The Communist Manifesto*. Also: *Peter Pan*." (*New York Times*)

Michael Moorcock had another toe amputated in January but seems cheerful: "Main problem now is finding a shoe store that will sell me a size 11 and a size 8 as a pair..."

As Others See Us II. Kazuo Ishiguro's clone-themed novel *Never Let Me Go* can't be sf even though he says it is, because he's too respectable. To clarify: "It isn't science fiction – indeed its procedures are the very reverse of generic, for there is no analogy at work in the text, which instead labours to produce its iterative naturalism as a

kind of sub-set or derivation of our own.” (*Guardian*)

Court Circular. US judge Shira Sheindlin threw out the Adrian Jacobs estate's claim that J.K. Rowling's massive *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* plagiarised Jacobs's 36-page *The Adventures of Willy the Wizard*: “The contrast between the total concept and feel of the works is so stark that any serious comparison of the two strains credulity.” The identically meritless UK lawsuit continues. A similar suit against Stephen King relies on cherry-picked similarities between his *Duma Key* and the plaintiff's vanity-press novel. Thus King obviously stole his phrase ‘I was like a bird hypnotized by a snake’ from the other chap's ‘controlled him like the talons of an eagle wrapped around a harmless garter snake’. What's more, a frog in King's book and a fiancée in the other both have sharp teeth. Characters in each novel say ‘What do you think?’, words never before strung together in that order...

Ray Bradbury, complains the associate director of a US library that's going digital, is a major source of Bad Attitude: “I blame Ray Bradbury and Hitler. People think of getting rid of books as being almost an immoral thing.” (*Johns Hopkins Magazine*)

Yo-Ho-Ho! 2010's most net-pirated films were *Avatar* (16.58 million downloads), *Kick-Ass* (11.4) and *Inception* (9.72), with further genre titles in the top ten. (BBC)

Thog's Masterclass. Similes Special. ‘Wreathed around her limbs, her bedizened garment resembled weeping woven of gemstones and recrimination.’ ‘...as profound as orogeny’ ‘He was merely a spectator, as oneiric as a figment...’ ‘Around Linden, the wan glitter of starlight lay like immanence on the friable crust.’ ‘...as empty of consciousness as an abandoned farmhouse’ ‘In hollows like denuded swales...’ ‘Cold and scalding as congealed fire, the flat wilderland ached towards its illimitable horizons.’ (all Stephen R. Donaldson, *Against All Things Ending*, 2010) • Author's Possible Response to the Above: ‘Puerile wight!’ (Ibid) • Dept of Clingy Female Emotion. ‘The teacup-sized tears splashed down the front of his shirt...’ (Silas Water, *The Man with Absolute Motion*, 1955) • Alternative Energy Debunked. ‘...you dare not use the power of the tides, for that would slow the Earth and destroy its entire ecology...’ (Ibid)

R.I.P.

Brian Barritt (1934–2011), UK counter-culture author who collaborated with Timothy Leary and wrote the ‘near-unpublishable’ sf sex comedy *The Nabob of Bombasta* (2010), died on 30 January aged 76.

Neil Barron (1934–2010), US bibliographer and editor best known for his massive *Anatomy of Wonder: A Critical Guide to Science Fiction* (five editions, 1976 to 2004), died on 5 September 2010.



▲ **Elisabeth Beresford** (1926–2010), UK children's author whose *The Wombles* (1968) led to many further books and short BBC films about these cuddly and precociously eco-aware creatures, died on 24 December aged 84. Another series, the ‘Magic’ fantasies in the vein of E. Nesbit, began with *Awkward Magic* (1964). Beresford received the MBE in 1998.



▲ **Nicholas Courtney** (1929–2011), UK actor best known and loved in sf circles as *Doctor Who*'s Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart of UNIT, died on 22 February aged 81. He was honorary president of the Doctor Who Appreciation Society.

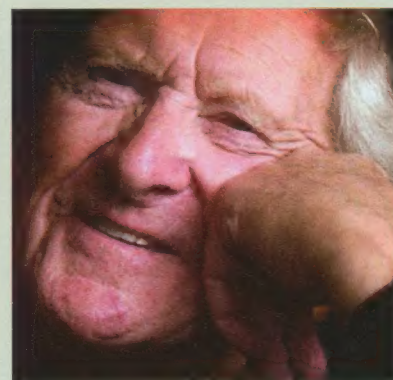
Ion Hobana (1931–2011), noted Romanian sf author, editor, translator

and historian, several of whose stories appeared in English translation, died on 22 February aged 80. He was a 1980 Eurocon award winner.

John Iggulden (1917–2010), Australian writer whose one sf novel was the dystopian *Breakthrough* (1960), died on 8 October last year; he was 93.

Melissa Mia Hall (1956–2011), US author of short fiction for various anthologies and magazines, and editor of the anthology *Wild Women* (1997), died unexpectedly on 29 January.

Brian Jacques (1939–2011), UK author of the lengthy Redwall series of animal fantasies for children that began with the mouse epic *Redwall* (1986), died on 5 February; he was 71.



▲ **Dick King-Smith** (1922–2011), UK author whose more than 130 books for children include animal stories such as *The Sheep-Pig* (1983, filmed as *Babe*) and magical fantasies such as *The Queen's Nose* (1983; three BBC series 1995–1998), died on 4 January aged 88. He received the OBE in 2010.

Margaret K. McElderry, US children's editor and publisher at Harcourt Brace and Simon & Schuster, whose authors included Susan Cooper, Edward Eager, Andre Norton and Mary Norton, died on 14 February aged 98. She founded and named S&S's still-continuing McElderry Books imprint.

Lan Wright (Lionel Percy Wright, 1923–2010), UK author whose first sf story appeared in *New Worlds* in 1952, and who published six novels 1957–1968, died on 1 October 2010 aged 87. He left his magazine collection to the SF Foundation.



THE SILVER WIND

NINA ALLAN

Shooter's Hill had a rough reputation. The reforestation policy had returned the place to its original state, and the tract of woodland between Blackheath and Woolwich was now as dense and extensive as it had once been in the years and centuries before the first industrial revolution. The woods were rife with carjackers and highwaymen, and scarcely a week went by without reports of some new atrocity. The situation had become so serious that there were moves in parliament to reinstate the death penalty for highway robbery as it had already been reinstated for high treason. During the course of certain conversations I noticed that local people had taken to calling Oxleas Woods by its old name, the Hanging Wood, although no hangings had occurred there as yet. At least not officially.

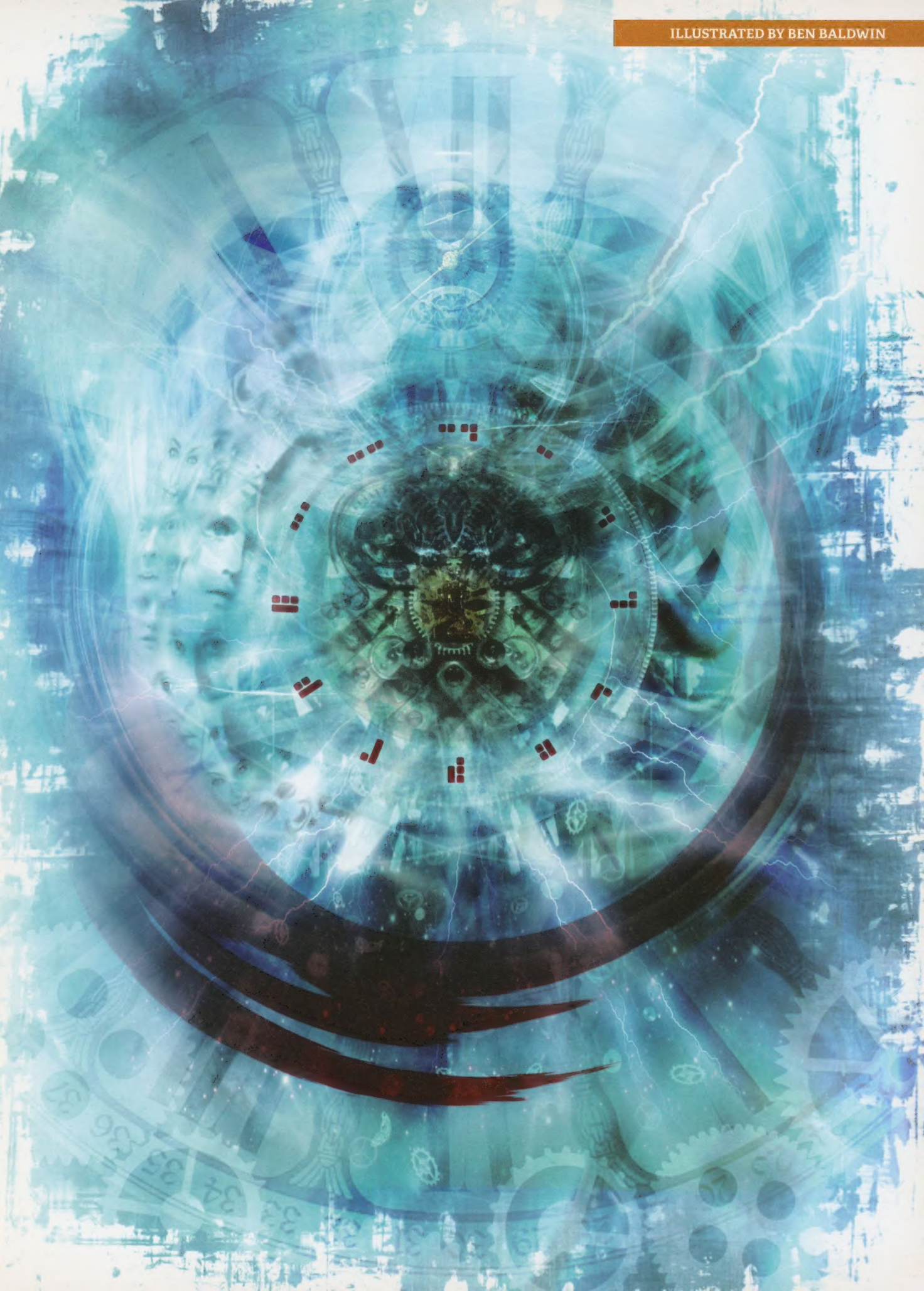
There was still a regular bus service out to Shooter's Hill, although I heard rumours that the drivers rostered on to it had to be paid danger money. I made up my mind to call on Owen Andrews in the afternoon; the evening curfew was strictly enforced in that part of London.

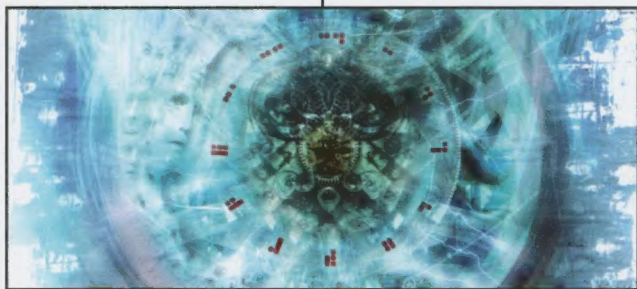
"How on earth do you manage, living alone out here?" I said to him. "Don't you get nervous?"

He laughed, a deep inner rumbling that seemed to shake the whole of his tiny being. "I've lived here for most of my life," he said. "Why should I leave?"

Owen Andrews was an achondroplastic dwarf, and as such he was subject to all the usual restrictions. He could not marry, he could not register children, although I supposed that this question was now academic, that he had been sterilised or even castrated once he had passed through puberty. Everyone had heard of such cases, and to knowingly pass on bad genes had been a custodial offence ever since Clive Billings's British Nationalists came to power. There was a photograph on the mantelpiece in Andrews's living room, a picture of Owen Andrews when he was young. The photograph showed him seated at a table playing cards with a pretty young woman. The woman was smiling, her fingers pressed to her parted lips. Andrews's face was grave, his head bent in concentration over his cards. He had a handsome profile, and the camera had been angled in such a way as to conceal the most obvious aspects of his deformity. There was something about the picture that disturbed me, that hinted at some private tragedy, and I turned away from it quickly. I asked him again about the Shooter's Hill Road and about the carjackers, but he insisted the whole thing had been exaggerated by the press.

"This place has always had a history to it, and history has a habit of repeating itself. If you don't believe me read Samuel Pepys. People feared the Hill in his day too. You'll find Mr Pepys particularly eloquent on the subject of what they used to do to the highwaymen." He paused. "Those of them they caught up with, that is."





I first learned about Owen Andrews through one of

my clients. Lewis Usher had once been a rich man, but when the Americans abandoned Europe for China he lost everything more or less overnight. His wife was Zoe Clifford, the film actress. She died giving birth to their daughter, or from complications after the birth, I'm not sure which. The child was taken away by relatives of Zoe's and Lewis Usher was left alone in an enormous rambling house at the top end of Crooms Hill, less than half a mile from the centre of Greenwich. The place would have been worth a fortune in the old days, but it was far too big for him, and after the crash he could no longer afford to maintain it. In spite of its poor condition it was the kind of property my agency specialised in and I was able to negotiate a very good price with an independent pharmaceuticals company. They were attracted by the council tax rates, which were still much lower on the south side of the Thames. The firm's representative, a Hugo Greenlove, said they were planning to turn the house into a research facility. He rattled on excitedly, making exaggerated arm gestures to demonstrate how rooms might be divided and walls torn down, and although I thought it was tactless of Greenlove to talk that way in front of the house's current owner Lewis Usher seemed completely unmoved. Once Greenlove had left he told me to get rid of the lot, not just the house itself but everything in it. He didn't say as much but I had the impression he was planning to use the proceeds of the sale to get him to America. I imagined he had contacts there already.

"You really want to sell everything?" I said. In spite of my sympathy for Usher I was excited by the prospect. The house was stuffed with things I could move on for a handy profit, paintings and small bronzes and so on, and my files back at the office were stuffed with the names of people who would be happy to buy them.

"There are some things of Zoe's I want, but that's about it," he said. There were framed photographs of his wife everywhere about the place, detailing the course of her career from stage to screen. She had been a tall, angular woman with a crooked mouth and a wide forehead but the pictures hinted at a deep sensuality and a striking emotional presence. Usher was still very much in mourning for her, and I think it was the fact that I was also a widower that made him trust me. He said I could have first refusal on anything I wanted from the house, and when I tentatively mentioned a few of the things that caught my fancy he named a price so low I felt filthy with guilt even as I agreed to it. Usher must have seen some of this in my expression because he thumped me hard on the shoulder and began to laugh.

"You'll be doing me a favour," he said. "It's surprising how little you need, when you come right down to it."

He laughed again, the laugh quickly turning into a painful-sounding cough that made me wonder if there was something more than grief that was consuming him. This could certainly account for his indifference to his material possessions. Yet when a couple of moments later I pointed to a small brass travelling clock and asked him how much he wanted for it his whole demeanour changed. An excited light came into his eyes and he looked ten years younger.

"That's an Owen Andrews clock," he said. "Or at least it's supposed to be. I've never had it authenticated. I accepted it *in lieu* of a debt. I've had it for years."

He looked down at the clock approvingly, his face registering the sort of pride that suggested that even if he had not made the clock himself it was people like him, people with money and influence, that made such things possible, and I glimpsed for a moment the man who for twenty years had been on the directorial board of a successful multinational company.

"Who is Owen Andrews?" I said. I knew little about clocks and their makers, just as I knew little of furniture or scrimshaw or glass. I had never counted myself as an antiques expert. I was an estate agent who indulged in a little antiques trading on the side. I counted my successes as luck, and the willingness to let myself be guided by instinct rather than knowledge.

"Owen Andrews is a dwarf," Usher said. "He makes alchemical clocks. More popularly known as time machines."

It was my turn to laugh, a trifle uneasily. "You're not serious?" I said. "You don't believe in that rubbish, surely?"

I had watched several TV documentaries on the subject of the new physics but I had never taken any of it very seriously. It was my wife Miranda that was interested. Miranda had been like that, fascinated by the unknown and always wanting to believe in the impossible. It was this openness to experience that had convinced her she could help her father, even when the doctors had warned that he might be dangerous. Her faith in the possibility of miracles was one of the things I loved most about her. I wondered if Usher was trying to set me up in some way, trying to make the clock seem more valuable by spinning an elaborate yarn around it. Why he would do this when he seemed willing to more or less give away the other items I had specified I had no idea. I glanced at the clock again. Its case gleamed a dull ochre. It was only a small thing, and quite plain, but the more I looked at it the more I wanted to buy it. I had already made up my mind not to sell it on afterwards, that I would keep it for myself. But if Usher named some ridiculous price then the game was over.

Usher shrugged. "I think it's all nonsense," he said. "I happen to believe that time is like water pouring out of a tap, that once it's been spilled there's no calling it back again, not for love nor money nor any of these new-fangled gadgets. The man who gave me that clock offered it to me because he thought it was valuable but I accepted it because I liked it. I thought it was beautifully made."

"But surely he can't have believed it was a time machine? It looks like an ordinary carriage clock to me."

Usher smiled. "How else would you describe a clock if not as a time machine?" He narrowed his eyes, locking them on mine for a moment as if challenging me to a duel then glanced off to one side, shaking his head. "But in the way you mean, no,

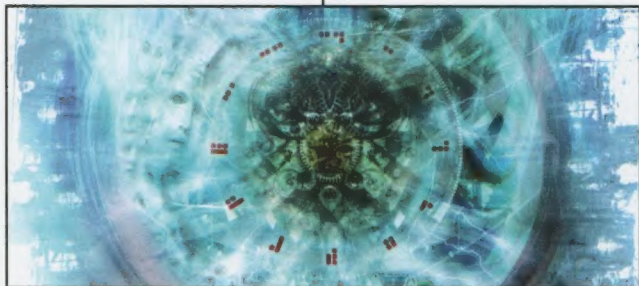
it's not a time machine. From what I gather it's one of his 'dry' clocks, designed to tell the time and nothing more. It's accurate of course and rather lovely but the case is brass, not gold, and in today's market that makes it practically worthless. If you like it that much you can have it for nothing. The deal you just did on the house has solved a lot of problems. Call it a little extra bonus on top of your fee."

My heart leapt. I had to concentrate hard to stop myself snatching the clock right off the shelf there and then, just so I could feel its weight in my hand.

"Is the maker still alive, this Owen Andrews?" I said instead.

"I have no idea," said Usher. "I know nothing about him other than what I've told you."

I think it was in that moment that I made my decision, that I would seek out Owen Andrews and discover the truth about him. I told myself that this was because the little brass clock had been the only thing to excite my interest since my wife died. There was more to it than that though. Somewhere deep inside me I was nursing the crazy hope that Owen Andrews was a man who could turn back time.



"Are you sure you want to get involved with this man, Martin?" Dora said. "He's bound to be under surveillance." She dragged on her cigarette, leaning to one side to knock the ash into the chipped Meissen saucer she kept permanently at her elbow for this purpose. I had long since given up going on at her about her smoking. Like Samsara perfume and the fake leopardskin coat she wore it was simply a part of her. She was wry and canny, with the kind of piercing, analytical intelligence that had sometimes caused me to wonder why she had left her job with the Home Office. The freelance legal work she did now earned her a steady and fairly comfortable income but it was hardly big money and only a fraction of what she was really worth. Once in the early days of our friendship, when for a brief while I imagined there might be the possibility of romance between us, I got drunk and asked her about it.

"I can't work for those people any more," she said. "I don't believe in doing deals with the devil." She laughed, a brisk 'ha,' then changed the subject. Later that same evening I found out she was married to a chap called Ray Levine, an ex-airline pilot who now grubbed around for work shuttling government ministers to and from their various conferences and crisis summits.

"Ray's a bit of an arsehole, I suppose," Dora said. "But we've known each other since we were kids. We used to smoke roll-ups together in the teachers' toilets. That's something you can't replace. I don't care what he does on those trips of his, just so long as he doesn't bring it home with him. I learned a long time

ago that trust is a lot more important than sexual fidelity."

I first met Dora when I sold her her flat, a three-room conversion in Westcombe Park occupying part of what had once been a private nursing home. It was an attractive property, with high windows, a stained glass fanlight, and solid oak parquet flooring, but it had serious disadvantages, most crucially the access, which was via a fire escape belonging to the neighbouring property. I knew this could pose legal problems if she ever wanted to sell, and because I found myself liking her I broke all the usual rules of the business and told her so. The forthrightness of her reaction surprised me but as I came to know her better I realised it was typical of her.

"I can't make a decision to buy something based on whether I might want to get rid of it later," she said. "This is about a home, not a business investment. This is where I want to live."

Then she smiled and told me she was a lawyer. She knew all about flying freehold and compromised access but she was adamant she wanted the flat, as she was adamant about a lot of things. After she moved in I took the liberty of contacting her and asking if she was interested in doing some freelance contract work. Within a year she was working two full days a week for me, clarifying the deadlocks and stalemates that occasionally threatened to upset some of our more lucrative sales. She had a genius for finding a loophole, or for finding anything, really. It was for this reason that I asked her if she could help me track down Owen Andrews. I didn't go into any details and Dora being Dora didn't ask questions. A couple of days later she called me at home and asked me if I could come round to her place.

"I've got things to show you," she said. "But it's not the kind of stuff I want to bring into the office."

She opened the door to me dressed in a pair of Ray's old camo pants held up with elastic braces. "Andrews is alive and well," she said. "Would you like a drink?" She poured Glenlivet and wafted Samsara, the kind of luxury items that were often difficult to find on open sale but readily available if you had the right contacts and I supposed the whisky and the perfume came via Ray. Levine himself was rarely at the flat. Dora said he spent most of his nights on airbases or in the bed of whichever woman he was currently trying to impress.

"It's like being married to your own younger brother," she said. "But to be honest I think I'd kill him if he was here all the time."

I occasionally wondered what would happen if I tried to spend the night with her. The prospect was tantalising, but in the end I suppose I valued our friendship, not to mention our business relationship, too highly to risk ruining it through some misconceived blunder. Also she had liked Miranda.

She handed me my drink then pushed a small stack of papers towards me across the table.

"Here," she said. "Have a look at these."

The papers comprised a mixture of photocopies and typed notes, with markings and annotations everywhere in Dora's spiky black script. There were photocopies of a civil service entrance exam and a standard ID card, together with a passport-sized photograph and a copy of an article from a magazine I had never heard of called *Purple Cloud*. The photograph showed a swarthy, rather handsome man with a high forehead

and heavy brows. It was just a head shot, and offered no clue to his stature, but his ID gave his height as 4'10", with the note that between the ages of nine and fourteen he had undergone four major operations on his legs. His address was at Shooter's Hill, just a couple of miles east of where we were sitting but its reputation for violence and the fact of the night-time curfew meant that in terms of current reality it was half a world away. In his civil service entrance test Andrews had scored ninety-eight percent.

"This is amazing," I said. "Where did you get all this stuff?"

"There's more," Dora said. She pulled some papers from the stack and riffled quickly through them until she found what she wanted. "He worked for the MoD on classified projects. That means they could have wiped his whole ID if they'd wanted to, or altered it in some way, anything. The really weird thing is that he was dismissed from his post but left alone afterwards. That never happens. Normally they'd have you in prison, at least for a while, at least until the work you were doing was no longer relevant. The fact that Andrews is still out there means he's valuable to them in some way, or that he's a spy. The very fact that he was working for them at all is some kind of miracle. He's a dwarf, a non-person. It's getting harder for people like him even to be granted a work permit." She paused and stubbed out her cigarette. I caught the sweet reek of Marlboro tobacco. "The thing is, they'll have their eye on him. If you go near him they'll have their eye on you, too. Is that what you want? This isn't a very good time to be getting yourself on somebody's blacklist."

"I just want to talk to him."

"So you say. And I've read that article. What's all this about, Martin?"

"It's not about anything. I have a clock he made, that's all. I was just curious."

"Well, you know what they say about curiosity killing the cat."

It should have been funny, but it wasn't. We sat side by side at the table, neither of us saying anything. I wanted to reassure her in some way, to at least thank her for what she had done for me, but neither of these things seemed possible. I realised we were on new ground, the unstable territory that springs into being whenever the conversation between two people begins to trespass beyond its usual limits. Politics was something that didn't get discussed much, not even in private.

"Can I take all these papers with me?" I said in the end.

"Please do. I don't want them. I had to use my old passwords to get hold of some of that stuff. I'd be instantly traceable, if anyone had a mind to go looking. It's a ridiculous risk to take. God knows what I was thinking." She ran her hands through her hair, making it stand out about her head like a stiff black halo. "It was fun, though. It beat the shit out of verifying leasehold clauses."

She smiled, and I knew we were back on safe ground. I knew also that the subject of Owen Andrews was closed between us, that whatever fleeting thrill she had gained from hacking into Home Office files she wanted no further part in what I was doing. Doubtless she had her reasons. I had no wish to know what these were, just as she had no real wish to know what had interested me in Owen Andrews in the first place. I walked home the long way round, skirting the boundary of Greenwich

Park, which was kept locked after sundown and was sometimes closed to the public for months at a time. The captive trees made me think of Shooter's Hill, an outpost of an imaginary realm shrouded in a rough twilight. I wondered what Andrews was doing right at that moment, and the strangeness of it all made my heart turn over. One thing I had noticed and not mentioned to Dora while glancing through his papers was that several of the documents gave contradictory information about his birth date. Neither was it simply a matter of a couple of days. His birth certificate had him a whole fifteen years younger than his ID card. His medical records showed him as ten years older. I guessed that bureaucratic errors like this must happen constantly. But still, it seemed unnervingly peculiar.

When I got home I read the article Dora had copied from *Purple Cloud*. It was an essay about how the previous government had made use of what the writer called 'time-bridge technology' to try and alter the course of the war in the Middle East. It had the smack of conspiracy theory and sensationalism I associated with the kind of magazine that specialises in UFOs and the so-called paranormal and I found myself not believing a word of it. According to the article Owen Andrews was significant as the pioneer of something called the Silver Wind, a mechanical time-stabiliser that certain military scientists had subverted to their own purposes. Apparently Andrews also had connections with the German firm of Lange und Soehne, who had made watches for everyone from Adolf Hitler to Albert Einstein, as well as being pioneers in the field of atomic engineering.

I knew I would have to go and see him. It was not just about the clock any more, and after reading the flimsy article in *Purple Cloud* my doubts about the feasibility of time travel were stronger than ever. It was the very fact of Owen Andrews now that fascinated me. The fact that he was a non-person, and yet seemed somehow immune to political reality. The fact that he seemed to have three different birthdays. The fact that he lived in a place where no one but the outlawed and the desperate could reasonably survive. I felt as if I had stepped on the edge of something and felt it move, as if I had been coming down the street and tripped over a loose paving stone, only to discover that it was in fact a secret hatchway into an underground city.

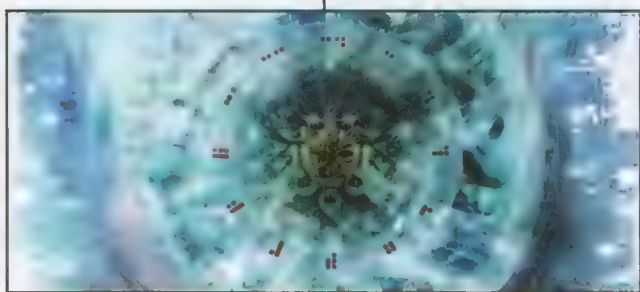
It sounds insane to say it, but I had never really questioned the world I lived in. I remembered the hung parliaments, the power shortages, the forced deportations of the millions of blacks and Asians from the city ghettos to the vast factory ships built to transport them to the so-called 'home-states' of Nigeria, Botswana and the near-uninhabitable wastelands of the exhausted Niger delta. I remembered the fire on board the *Anubis*, mostly because a teacher of ours, Kwella Cousens, was one of the three thousand deportees who died in the blaze. She taught Business French for a time at the college where I was studying but lost her work permit during the tax revisions and so was forced to take a place on one of the transports. I remembered these things, as generations before me might have remembered the moon landings or the Kennedy assassination, as news flashes and photographic images. They happened when I was in my late teens, busy with college work and desperate to lose my virginity.

The truth was, I remembered them as things that had happened to other people. The new employment laws affected

mostly black people and immigrants. If you were white and had a UK ID card you could mostly go on with your life as if nothing had changed. I had seen what happened to people who made a fuss: the small number of students from my college who joined the demonstrations and the dock pickets, the pamphleteers who for a time had littered the streets of the major cities with their *samizdat* scandal sheets had all spent nights in jail and some of them had had their grants suspended. One young man who chained himself to the railings of Buckingham Palace even had his national insurance number revoked. They bundled him off to Niger with the blacks. I remember thinking what a fool he was, to get mixed up in something that didn't concern him.

Up until now the biggest decision I had ever made about my life was the decision to ask Miranda to marry me. As I got into bed that night I realised I was on the verge of making another decision of that same magnitude and perhaps greater, a decision that could change my life in ways I would not know about until it was too late to recant: I was about to start asking questions about things I had previously discounted as none of my business.

I lay in bed, listening to the steady ticking of Owen Andrews's clock on my bedside table and the distant phut-phutting of the wind-powered generators across the river on the Isle of Dogs. As I drifted off to sleep it seemed to me that the clock and the generators had somehow combined forces to form a great silver wheel, its shafts and spokes catching the moonlight, casting its radiance in a hundred different directions.



The bus was ancient, its wheel arches pitted with rust. It was full of soldiers. Their rambunctious, raucous presence made me nervous, although I realised this was illogical, that there was nothing unusual or sinister in their behaviour, and that the presence of forces personnel was entirely to be expected. Shooter's Hill was a restricted zone. Civilians could enter, and the shops and small businesses that had serviced the area prior to its closure were allowed to keep running as usual, at least partly for the benefit of the new influx of military. But after sundown any movement into and out of the village was strictly prohibited. There was a military checkpoint, and it was said that the woods behind the old hospital were alive with snipers, that the turf battles between the military and the carjack gangs that used Oxleas Woods as a hideout had taken on the dimensions of guerrilla warfare.

Officially the place was a shooting range and assault course, like Dartmoor and Romney Marsh, but everyone knew there was more to it than that. There were rumours that the rundown hospital buildings had been turned over to one of the specialist

divisions as a testing laboratory for biological weapons. I had always thought the idea was far-fetched, just gossip really, but as the bus pulled up Maze Hill and into the forest I began to wonder. Passing into the forest felt strange, almost like crossing the border into another country. The starkly open expanse of Blackheath Common gave way abruptly to massed ranks of oak and ash and beech, the trees growing so closely together that it was as if we had entered a tunnel. The lowest branches scraped the roof of the bus, linking their gnarled green fingers above our heads. Rough tarmac and dirt tracks branched off from the road at regular intervals, and between the trees I could make out the rectangular masses of houses and apartment blocks. I wondered who would choose to live out here. I knew that much of the housing in the vicinity of the hospital had been demolished by order of the government.

Aside from one burnt-out car at the side of the road I saw no overt signs of violence but in spite of this I found the atmosphere oppressive. The forest seemed unending, and its green stillness unnerved me; I felt as if something was lying in wait, just out of sight.

We passed through a set of traffic lights, then came to a standstill beside the two fluted granite columns that marked the entrance to the hospital. The main building was mostly hidden behind a high stone wall topped with metal spikes and coils of barbed wire. Armed sentries stood on guard beside a swing barrier. The soldiers on the bus all rose to their feet, jostling each other impatiently as they crowded towards the front. Once outside they formed a straggling line, waiting to be admitted. I saw one of them rummaging in his knapsack, presumably for his entrance pass or some other necessary document.

I pressed my face to the window, watching the soldiers go through their ID check. As the bus pulled away I caught a glimpse of narrow windows and blotchy grey walls. Now that the soldiers were gone the bus was almost empty. Towards the rear sat two men in business suits and a stout, middle-aged woman with a wicker basket on her knees. The basket contained three live chickens. On the seat across from me sat a teenaged girl. Her pale face and wispy fair hair reminded me a little of Miranda. She glanced past me at the soldiers in the road.

"That's the loony bin," she said to me suddenly. "They guard it to stop the loonies getting out. Some of them have killed people."

I stared at her in silence for a moment, unsure of what I should say. When I looked back towards the road the hospital and the soldiers were already some distance behind us. I had vague memories of the place from my childhood, when Oxleas Woods had been unrestricted and carjackings less prevalent. The hospital was derelict then, a forgotten eyesore. We used to pretend it was haunted, or believed perhaps that it really was, I was no longer sure. In either case, the gates had always been kept firmly secured against intruders, and the high wall that ringed the perimeter meant that the grounds were impenetrable, even to the most resourceful and daring among our company. Its gloomy edifice had always been a source of vague dread to me. It was not ghosts I feared so much as the building itself. I hated its barred windows, the frowning façade that always made me think of dungeons and prisons. I could never escape the idea that terrible things had happened there.

I was amazed and strangely gratified to find that the intervening years had done little if anything to moderate my dislike of the place.

"Do you know what the soldiers are doing there?" I said to the girl. I had taken her for about thirteen, but now that I looked at her closely I saw she was older than that, eighteen or nineteen perhaps. It was just that her thinness and her sullen, rather vacant stare made her look much younger. She did not really resemble Miranda, other than in the colour of her hair. The girl pressed her lips tightly together and shook her head vehemently from side to side. She seemed startled, even frightened that I had spoken to her, even though she had spoken to me first. It crossed my mind that she might be retarded.

"I've been inside," she said. She glanced at me from beneath her colourless lashes, as if checking to see that I was still listening. I felt certain that she was lying. I turned away from her and back towards the window. We were coming into the village. Shooter's Hill had never been much of a place, and the encroachment of the forest made it seem even less significant. I saw a general store and a post office, a church and beside that a recreation hall or perhaps a school house. One side of the dusty main road was flanked by houses, a mixture of small flint cottages and slightly larger Victorian terraces. On the other side of the street the forest began, stretching in an unbroken swathe as far as the Carshalton Reservoir and beyond that the Sussex Weald.

The bus ground to a halt beside the Bull Inn. As I rose to my feet the fair-haired girl scampered past me, darting along the pavement and then disappearing down an alleyway between two of the houses. The bus coughed once and then lurched forward, bearing the chicken woman and the suited businessmen on towards the dockyard at Woolwich. The silence closed itself around me, so complete it seemed material, green in colour and with the texture of house dust. I looked back the way I had come. Somewhere to the north of me lay the boulevards and tramlines and bomb sites of central London. I hesitated for a moment in front of the pub then headed off down the road. On my left was the water tower, a renovated Victorian structure that I guessed would serve all the houses in the village and probably the hospital too. It soared above the rooftops, its brick-built crenellations weathered to the colour of clay. Owen Andrews's house was on Dover Road, one of a terrace of eight Victorian villas and directly in the shadow of the water tower. The houses were shielded from the road by a thin line of trees. Fifty years ago and as a main route into London the road would have been seething with traffic. The universal tax on private vehicles had changed everything and so had the closure of the woodlands. Dover Road was now a forest byway frequented mainly by logging trucks and army vehicles. Weeds spilled through the cracks in its tarmac. For the first time since setting out that morning I wondered properly what on earth I was doing there.

Andrews's house was approached by a short pathway, a couple of paving slabs laid end to end across a yellowed patch of pockmarked turf. I stepped quickly up to the door and pressed the bell. I heard it ring in the hallway beyond. I stood there waiting for what seemed an age. I had no doubt there were unseen watchers, and whether this would have repercussions was

something I would only discover later. I bent down and peered in through the letterbox. I caught a glimpse of cream walls and wooden floorboards and then the door was opened, so suddenly I almost went flying.

"Can I help you?" said Owen Andrews. "Are you lost?"

"No," I said, staring down at him. "At least I don't think so. It was you that I came to see."

"You'd better come in then," said Andrews. "I don't get many visitors these days." He retreated inside, moving with a slow rolling gait that was almost a waddle. He seemed unsurprised to see me. I followed him into the house. Things were happening so fast they had begun to feel slightly unreal.

He took me through to a room at the back. The room was steeped in books, so many of them that the ochre-coloured wallpaper that lined the room showed though only in oddly-spaced random patches. Glazed double doors overlooked a narrow strip of garden. A set of library steps on castors stood close to one wall. Andrews heaved himself up on to a battered chaise longue, which from the multitude of books and papers stacked at one end I guessed was his accustomed reading chair.

"Sit down," he said, waving at the chair opposite, an upright wing chair upholstered in faded green velvet. "Tell me why you're here."

I lowered myself into the chair. "I'm sorry to turn up uninvited like this," I said. "But I bought a clock of yours recently and I wanted to ask you about it. I wanted to talk to you as soon as possible. I hope you don't mind."

"A clock of mine? How fascinating. Which one?"

He leaned forward in his seat, clearly interested. He was classically dwarfish, with foreshortened limbs and a head that seemed too big for his body, but his torso was powerful and upright and he carried himself with such dignity that it is true to say that within this first five minutes of meeting him I had already forgotten his diminutive stature. His force of personality was tangible. I thought he was probably the most extraordinary man I had ever met. I described the clock to him, telling him also how I had come by it.

"I know the one," he said at once. "The case was made from old bell metal."

He grabbed a sheet of paper from the pile at his feet and began to draw on it, sketching in rapid strokes with a blue Bic biro. He gazed at his work appraisingly, tapping the blunt end of the pen against his teeth then handed me the paper. His drawing captured the likeness of my clock in every detail.

"That's it," I said. "That's amazing."

Andrews smiled. "I find them hard to let go of," he said. "It's a weakness of mine. But you didn't come all the way out here to ask me about an old clock. A simple telephone call would have dealt with that. Why don't you tell me what you came for really?"

I could feel myself beginning to blush. The man's forthrightness startled me, and now that I was about to put it into words the thing I had come to ask seemed ridiculous, dangerous even. But I had come too far to turn back. And the fact was that I trusted him. I believed that Owen Andrews would tell me the truth, no matter how difficult or unpleasant that truth might be.

"My wife died," I said at last. "Her name was Miranda. She was killed in a car accident. Her father drove his car off a cliff

into the sea and drowned them both."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Andrews. "That's a terrible story." His eyes were clouded with concern, and I was surprised to see that he really was sorry, not just interested as most people were when they first discovered what had happened to Miranda. I didn't blame them for being interested. The story was shocking and dramatic, a breakdown in normality that had never become entirely real to me, even after the wreck was salvaged and the bodies recovered. Who would not be interested? It is all but impossible for one man to climb inside another man's sorrow. But I could see from his face that Owen Andrews was at least trying. I guessed he was more practised than most in enduring heartache.

"I read about you," I said. "About the work you did for the army. I read about the Silver Wind."

His dark eyes flashed, his expression changing so suddenly it was almost as if my words had thrown a switch inside him.

"You're asking me to bring back your wife? That is what you're saying?"

I nodded and looked down at the ground. I felt smaller than an insect.

"Do you have any background in physics?" he said.

"Not in the least."

"Well, if you did you would know that what you are talking about is impossible. For one thing, the time sciences are in their infancy. We have about as much control over the time stream as a Neanderthal over a steam train. But mainly it is just not possible. A layman such as yourself tends to think of time as a single thread, an unbroken continuum linking all past events together like the beads on a necklace. We are discovering that time isn't like that. It's an amorphous mass, a rag bag if you like, a rag bag of history. The time stasis might grant you access to what you think of as the past, but it wouldn't be the past that you remember. You wouldn't be the same and neither would she. There's a good chance you wouldn't even recognise each other, and even if you did it's unlikely that you would have any sense of a shared history together. It would be like that feeling you get when you meet someone at a party and can't remember their name. You know you know them from somewhere, but you can't for the life of you think where from. It would be an alternative scenario, not a straight rewind. And Miranda would still probably end up dying in that car crash. We've found that the pivotal events in history still recur, even if the cause and effect are subtly different. It's as if the basic template, the temporal pattern if you like, is ingrained somehow. It's hard to eradicate."

He folded his arms across his chest, as if to indicate that this was his last word on the matter. I felt once again the power of his personality, the force of his intellect, and it was as if we were fighting a duel, his knowledge against my despair. I knew the battle was lost, but I could not deny myself one final, miserable onslaught.

"But I would see her again? She would be alive?"

"No. It might be possible to transfer to a version of reality where a version of Miranda is not dead yet. But that is all."

"Then that is what I want. I have money."

"No you don't," said Andrews. "And this has nothing to do with money." He fell silent, looking down at his hands, the fingers short and neat, pink as a baby's. I sensed that he was trou-

bled, that such brutal candour was not something he enjoyed.

"I'm sorry," I said in the end. "I've been very stupid."

"Not at all," said Andrews quickly. "And at least what you asked for is harmless, beautiful even, the kind of wish one might almost be tempted to grant if it were possible. I've had far worse propositions, believe me. Fortunately they've been equally impossible."

"You're talking about the army? The government?"

Andrews nodded. "I must warn you that this room might be bugged. I've given up bothering about it. They know my views and I have nothing to hide. But I wouldn't want to cause any unpleasantness for my friends." He paused, as if giving me the option to leave, but I stayed where I was and waited for him to continue. I realised two things: firstly that my pilgrimage to Shooter's Hill had always been about Andrews's story rather than mine, and secondly that I felt properly alive for the first time since Miranda died.

There was also the fact that Owen Andrews had called me his friend. I took this as a mark of trust and a gracious compliment but strangely it also felt *true*. For a brief instant something flickered at the back of my mind, a sense that there were some facts missing, like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, and then the curtain of logic descended and it was gone. I liked Andrews, and felt a kinship with him because of that. That was all.

"What's the matter?" Andrews said. His anger seemed vanished, and an amused smile tweaked at the corners of his mouth. I wondered what secrets my face had given away.

"Nothing," I said. "Go on."

He shifted his position on the chaise longue, sitting upright and hugging his knees. He was wearing green velvet slippers and grey schoolboy socks. The combination was both amusing and moving, and I was reminded of images I had seen in books, paintings by Velasquez and Goya of the court dwarfs of Spain. They had been the playthings of the nobility but in some cases they had actually been the secret power behind the throne. "Do you know about the hospital?" he said.

"I've heard the rumours," I replied. "What about it?"

I was surprised to hear him speak of the place, I suppose simply because it was the source of so much ignorant tittle-tattle. I thought of the strange girl I had met on the bus, and my heart sank. If Owen Andrews went spinning off in some similar tale of murderous lunatics it would make me start to doubt everything he had told me.

I was wrong, of course. The girl had not been completely deluded either, although I did not think of her again until much later.

"It's always been a military hospital," Andrews said. "It was designed and built by Florence Nightingale's nephew as a centre for the study and treatment of shell shock. It was the first hospital in the country of its kind."

"I've heard it's being used to test chemical weapons," I said. "Is that true?"

Andrews shook his head, seeming to dismiss the idea out of hand. "You said you read about the Silver Wind," he said. "What did you read, exactly?"

I hesitated, unwilling to reveal that the only hard information I had on Andrews's research had been gleaned from a UFO magazine. "Something about time-bridges," I said in the end.

"The article I read said that the army were trying to change the outcome of the Saudi war by stealing technology from the future. It all sounded rather improbable. I wasn't sure what to believe."

Andrews nodded. "Do you know what a tourbillon regulator is?"

"I have no idea."

"It was invented by Louis Breguet, in the eighteenth century. He became famous for making watches for Napoleon and Marie Antoinette. His grasp of mechanics was extraordinary and at least a century ahead of his time. He discovered a way of making time stand still. Please excuse me, just for one moment. It's better if I show you."

Andrews slid from the chaise longue and shuffled out of the room. A minute later he returned, bringing with him a small wooden box.

"Here's one I made earlier," he said with a smile. He flipped open the lid, and I saw there was a watch inside. Andrews lifted it out, laying the box carefully to one side on the floor. The watch was quite large, a facsimile of a gentleman's pocket watch from the nineteenth or early twentieth century. I was familiar with such articles, having bought and sold them on several occasions. This one had a silver case. Even to my untutored eye it was a thing of quite exceptional beauty.

"I studied Breguet's diaries for many years," said Andrews. "He died an old man. A lot of people thought he was crazy in his final years, suffering from Alzheimer's disease or some other form of dementia. It is true that he did lose some clarity of expression at the end, but that may well have been due to the complexity of the ideas he was struggling with. A lot of it is brand new science." He thumbed a catch, opening the back of the watch. I caught a glimpse of wires and levers, a mass of mechanical circuitry that glimmered as it rotated. Andrews cradled the watch in his left hand, using his right to point to first one of the gleaming internal wheels and then another. I quickly lost track of them all. Fortunately his words were somewhat easier to follow.

"The tourbillon is like a cage," he said. "It rotates the whole mechanism about its own axis. Breguet discovered this as a way of preventing gravity from dragging on the mechanism and making the watch run slow. In effect he made the mechanism weightless. The time stasis is simply a more advanced version of this idea. It makes time null and void within the area of its operation. The stasis creates a kind of temporal anteroom. Think of it as the lobby of a large hotel, with doors and lifts and corridors opening off it. Once you get through the entrance and into the lobby you can go anywhere you like within the building. It's the time stasis that reveals the entrance. Do you see?"

"Some of it." I paused. "It's what the article I read called the time-bridge."

"Yes. But I've never liked the term 'time-bridge.' Once again it's too linear. The lobby image is better, and useful, too. You know how easy it is to get lost in one of those big hotels. All the corridors look the same after a while."

By then I was struggling to make sense of it all. "But what use could this be to the army?" I said. "You've already told me that it's not possible to travel in time in the way people usually imagine it, so where's the point?"

"There isn't any. But the government refuse to believe that. They've set up a stasis field around the hospital and they are conducting experiments there, forcing people through into other realities and trying to control the future before it happens. And I'm not just talking about weapons. My guess is that they have glimpsed something up ahead they don't like, somewhere in one of the alternative futures, and are trying to eradicate that as a possibility. Think about it, what Hitler might have done if he had seen what would happen when he invaded Russia, or if Reagan had changed his mind over North Korea. It's insane, of course, like trying to do brain surgery with a pickaxe. They have the idea that I could help to refine the mechanism for them, and that is the single reason they leave me alone. They think I'll come round eventually to their way of thinking. They've offered me some marvellous inducements."

"But if they can't succeed where's the harm in it?"

"In the harm they're doing to people, for a start. They snatch people after curfew and then blame it on the carjackers. They snatch carjackers, too. They send them through the stasis, hoping that with time they'll be able to control their experiments more closely and through them begin to control the time stasis. As is the case of all dictatorships, they believe that individuals are expendable. Some of the people they send through never come back. Some never seem to leave, but their contact with the stasis seems to alter their substance. They're incomplete somehow; like underdeveloped photographs their colours are muted. They flicker in and out of existence, like ghosts. I have even begun to think that they *are* ghosts, or rather that the manifestations people think of as ghosts are not the spirits of the dead at all, but are actually the living products of unsuccessful experiments with a time stasis, conducted from a time-stream lying parallel to ours. Then there are the mutants, those occasional unfortunates that experience the stasis as an allergy, a chemical reaction that forces their physical substance into hideous aberrations. There's nothing that can be done for them. The soldiers simply release them into the forest. They don't mind if someone catches a glimpse of one of these poor creatures once in a while because they're better than any amount of barbed wire and electric fencing for discouraging intruders. I've no doubt that this is how the chemical weapons stories started. And if the mutants start causing trouble then the army simply go out and use them as target practice."

"But that's terrible."

"There are a lot of terrible things going on these days." He looked at me hard, as if holding me personally accountable for the transports and for the Saudi wars, for what had happened aboard the *Anubis*. "No doubt there have been the usual speeches about omelettes and breaking eggs. What none of them seem to realise is the harm they could be doing, not just with these local atrocities but on a wider scale. The stasis is a weak point, a lesion in time that if allowed to consolidate itself could undermine the stability of our own reality. The breach should be closed, at least until we understand its implications. There are people that have an idea of what is happening and want it stopped, but they have a tendency to disappear."

"A resistance, you mean?"

"I don't talk about that. I do still have some shreds of a private life, and I intend to hang on to them. I suppose it is true, that



everyone has his price."

A clear image came to me of the woman in the photograph, the smiling girl with the pretty mouth. Andrews folded the watch in his hand, pressing it shut.

"How long did it take you to make that?" I said.

"A long time," Andrews said. He smiled to himself, as if at some private joke. "Can I offer you something to eat?"

I stayed, and we talked. I told him about Miranda, and he told me about his childhood in Devon, his first encounter with a Breguet watch, at the town museum in Exeter. Some details of his stories seemed disconcertingly familiar, and several times I experienced that same feeling I had had earlier, that there was a wider sense to everything, just out of sight.

Andrews got up to put a lamp on. It was only then that I realised how late it was.

"I should be going," I said. "It'll be getting dark soon."

I had no idea what time the last bus went. In the light of what Andrews had told me the idea of breaking curfew was unthinkable.

"You're welcome to stay," said Andrews. "There's a spare bed upstairs."

"No, thank you," I said. For some reason the idea of spending the night there unnerved me.

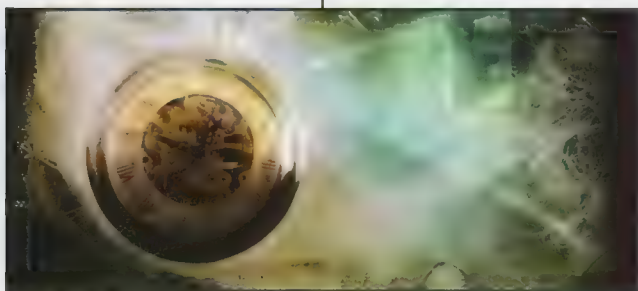
"Then at least say you'll come again. It's been just like the old days, having you here."

I laughed to show I knew he was joking, but his face remained serious. Suddenly I was anxious to leave.

"I will, I'll come soon," I said.

"See that you do. Mind how you go."

He waved to me from the doorway. I wondered if he ever got lonely. Dover Road stood silent, a ghost place. With the dusk approaching and to my increasingly anxious mind the place seemed to me like a mock-up, a stage set for some elaborate deception.



It was growing dusk. The forest loomed before me, its greens leached to lavender by the approaching twilight. In the Bull Inn the lamps were already lit, and further along the road towards the village there were lights showing in the windows of most of the houses. It was not long till curfew, but I reasoned that as long as I could get myself on a bus within the next half hour there would be nothing to worry about. I set off in the direction of the High Street, walking briskly in what I hoped was a businesslike fashion. I had just come in sight of the bus stop when I saw something terrible: a roadblock had been set up outside the post office. There were four soldiers manning it; all of them were armed with rifles. I stopped in my

tracks, ducking sideways into an alleyway lined with dustbins. My heart was racing. There was no question of approaching the barrier. Even though I had not breached the curfew and it was still my legal right to pass along the street I knew beyond any doubt that in practice this would count for nothing, that the soldiers would find some pretext to arrest me. What might happen after that was something I did not care to think about.

The safest move was to go back the way I had come, to return to Owen Andrews's house and take him up on his offer of spending the night there. I hesitated, knowing this was the logical course of action but still reluctant to take it. I trusted Andrews completely; the place I did not trust at all. As the dusk came steadily onwards, seeming to curl out from beneath the trees like tendrils of smoke, I realised I had a horror of it, that for some reason the thought of spending the night at Shooter's Hill was almost as impossible for me as the idea of confronting the soldiers at the barricade.

I felt horribly trapped. I cowered in the alleyway, staring at the trees opposite and knowing I had to make a decision in the next few minutes or risk breaking the curfew. It was then that it came to me there was a third option: I could bypass the checkpoint by cutting through the forest. The idea seemed simple enough. I was actually within sight of the checkpoint, and less than half a mile from the village boundary. I could walk that in less than fifteen minutes. I would not need to go far into the woods, just enough to keep me out of earshot of the soldiers. I should emerge on the Shooter's Hill Road somewhere between the hospital and Blackheath.

I ran quickly across the road, hoping that one of the soldiers down by the barrier would not choose that moment to turn his gaze in my direction. I slipped in between the trees, my feet crunching through leaf litter. The slope down from the road was steeper than I had imagined. I tripped against an exposed root and almost fell. In less than a couple of minutes I had completely lost sight of the road.

I had imagined there would be a pathway, some kind of track to follow but there were none, or at least none that I could find, and in the oncoming darkness it was difficult to see clearly for more than a couple of yards. I kept going, fighting my way through the underbrush in what I hoped was a westerly direction. There were no landmarks to guide me, no sounds other than the scuffling of my feet in the leaves and my own rapid breathing. I stopped moving, straining my ears for the rumble of a logging truck or even for the voices of the soldiers at the barricade but there was nothing. I could not have been more than a mile from the lighted windows of the Bull Inn, yet it was as if I had unwittingly strayed into some other universe. I could smell the trees all around me, the pungent odour of tree bark and rising chlorophyll. I remembered something from my schooldays, that it was during the hours of darkness that plants released their pent up stores of oxygen, and it seemed to me that I could feel their exhalations all around me, the collective green-tinged sigh of a thousand trees. The dark was growing, spreading across the forest floor like marsh gas. From somewhere further off came the echoing melancholy hooting of a night owl.

I walked for what felt like hours. I could no longer see where I was going, and had no idea of whether I was even vaguely

headed in the right direction. I was very afraid, but the state of high nervous tension that had taken me over when I first realised I was lost had worn itself out, blunting my terror to a dull background hum, a mental white noise that drove me incessantly forward whilst slowing the actions and reactions of my brain. Finally I came to a standstill. The woods seemed to close in around me, shuffling forward to block my escape like some vast black beast that knows its prey is all out of running. I slid to the ground where I stood, the dampness settling at once into my clothes. Until that moment I had not realised how cold it was. I began to shiver. I knew that if I was to spend the night in the open I had to get under cover somehow, but I was too exhausted by my flight through the woods to make any decisions. I closed my eyes, thinking confusedly that this might make the darkness less terrible. When I opened them again some minutes later it was to the sight of a yellowish glow, moving slowly towards me from between the trees. I could hear something also, the soft shushing sound of someone or something doing their best to move quietly across a ground that was ankle-deep in twigs and dry leaves.

I moved from a sitting to a lying position, stomach down in the dirt, never taking my eyes from the pale light that though still some distance off appeared to be coming closer with every second. I was torn by indecision. I did not wish to fall into the hands of soldiers or carjackers, but on the other hand I was desperate to be out of the forest. At that moment the thought any human company seemed better than none. As the light came closer I was able to discern amidst the surrounding darkness of trees the deeper, blacker bulk of a human figure: somebody carrying a torch, and coming my way.

In the end the simple need to hear a human voice outweighed my misgivings. I scrambled to my feet, extending my arms towards the figure with the lamp like a blind man trying to feel his way across a crowded room.

"Hello!" I cried. "Hello there. Wait for me!"

I moved forward, my attempt to run reduced by the darkness to an unsteady lurch. I crashed through the treacherous underbrush, stray twigs clawing at my hands and face. The figure stopped dead in its tracks, the torch beam wavering gently up and down. Its light was weak but my eyes had grown used to the darkness and were temporarily blinded. The figure took a step backwards, crackling the leaves underfoot. It seemed that it was as much afraid of me as I was of it.

"I'm lost," I said. "Do you know the way out of here?"

I could hear its breathing, slow and heavy, as if it was about to expire. There was a rank odour, a smell like burning fat tinged with underarm sweat. I was by now convinced that the figure was a fugitive, a lone carjacker perhaps, or an immigrant without a work permit, someone on the run from the police. None of that mattered to me; all I cared about was getting out of the woods.

"I'm not going to report you," I said. "I just want to find the road." I grabbed at its sleeve, anxious in case the figure tried to bolt away from me. It was wearing padded mittens, and a padded anorak made from some shiny nylon-coated fabric that was difficult to get a grip on. My fingers tightened involuntarily about its wrist. The figure moaned, a low, inhuman sound that made me go cold all over. I knew I had made an awful mistake.

I released the figure abruptly, pushing it backwards. As it flailed its arms to retain balance the torch beam darted upwards, lighting its face. Until that moment it had been shrouded in darkness, its features concealed by the large, loose hood of the nylon anorak. Now I saw something terrible: the thing's face was disfigured in some way, quite literally *de-formed*, squeezed apart and then rammed back together again in a careless and hideous arrangement that bore as little resemblance to an ordinary human face as the face of a corpse in an advanced stage of decomposition. The skin was thickly corrugated, set into runnels as if burned by acid. The mouth, a lipless slit, was slanted heavily to one side, dividing the face's lower portion in a raw diagonal slash. One of the eyes was sealed shut, smeared in its socket somehow like a clay eye inadvertently damaged by its sculptor's careless thumb. The other eye shone brightly in the torchlight, gazing at me in what I instinctively knew was sorrow as much as fear. The eye was fringed with long lashes, and quite perfect. The creature standing before me was a woman.

I screamed, I could not help it, though it was more from shock than from fear. I knew that I was seeing one of the mutants Owen Andrews had spoken of, one of the worst victims of the army's clumsy experiments with the time stasis. Andrews had called these creatures unfortunate, but his words had barely scratched the surface of the reality. In my traumatised state I could not grasp how this thing could survive, how it did not just *stop*, how the terrible damage inflicted allowed it still to go on living. The face was an apocalypse in flesh; it was impossible to know what further ravages had been unleashed upon the rest of her body and internal organs.

Her mental torment I could not bear to imagine.

My scream made her flinch, and she stumbled, dropping the torch. She dropped to her knees, sweeping her hands back and forth through the leaves in an effort to retrieve it. But either the padded mittens hampered her efforts or she no longer had proper control of her hands because it kept skidding out of her grasp. I saw my chance and made a lunge for it. Suddenly the torch was in my hand. The mutant girl howled, flinging herself at me as if she meant to topple me into the dirt.

I began to run. The girl picked herself up off the ground and began to follow. She was no longer crying, but I could hear her breathing, the raw panting gasp of it, and I felt sick with revulsion. The thought of having to fight her off, of having her ruined face pressed in close to mine as she battled me for the torch did a good deal to keep me moving. I knew the very fact of possessing the torch made me easy to follow, but there was no help for it. I pointed it ahead of me, panning the ground at my feet and lighting the way ahead the best that I could. The beam was weak, a feeble yellow, barely enough to see by. I kept expecting to bash into a tree or worse still to catch a foot in some pothole or crevice and twist my ankle and I have no doubt that one of these two things would have happened eventually.

In the end I was saved by the soldiers. I climbed a shallow rise, tearing my hands painfully on brambles in the process, and then I was in the open. I could sense rather than see that there were no more trees around me, and I guessed I had reached the edge of a woodland meadow. I shone the torch frantically about me, trying to work out which was the best way to go. Suddenly there were more lights, broad and penetrating beams of white

radiance, strafing the ground and dazzling my eyes. They were approaching from the side at a full-on run.

"Halt!" someone screamed. "Get down."

I threw myself to the ground, covering my head instinctively with my arms. A stampede seemed to pass over and around me. Then there was more shouting, a single wild cry that I knew was the girl, and then a burst of gunfire. I covered my ears, cowering against the ground, and the next minute I was being dragged upright, pulled back down the rise and into the trees. My mind froze and went entirely blank. I felt certain that I would die within the next few seconds. Someone shoved me from behind and I almost fell. The crisscrossing beams of powerful torches showed me a half-dozen men with blackened faces and wearing combat fatigues. The girl's body lay face down on the ground; a dark irregular stain was spreading across the back of the padded anorak. One of the soldiers kicked her, flipping her on to her side with the toe of his boot. The anorak shifted slightly, revealing a portion of the clothing beneath, a tattered woollen smock over filthy jeans.

Now with her face turned away from me she looked like any other dead girl. I felt my guts heave. I thought if I couldn't be sick I would choke, but I was terrified to be sick in case these men shot me for it.

"Frigging disgusting," said one of the men. I had the confused impression that he was referring to my weak stomach, then realised he was talking about the girl. "What do you think would happen if they started breeding?"

"Shut up, Weegie," said another. The tone of authority in his voice left no doubt that he was in charge. Then he turned to me. "What the fuck are you doing out here?"

My throat gave a dry click, and I felt once more the gagging reflex, but in the end I was able to answer.

"I came off the road," I said. "I got lost."

"ID?"

For a second I panicked, thinking I had lost my wallet somewhere or even left it behind at Andrews's place, but miraculously when I reached into my jacket pocket it was there. I handed it over in silence. The officer flicked through it briefly, letting his eyes rest for a moment upon my photograph and national insurance number, then amazingly handed it back.

"Bloody civvies," he said. "Do you *want* to get mistaken for one of these?" He nodded down at the girl's lifeless body. I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak.

"You'll have to come with us. It's for your own protection. I suggest you get moving." He nodded to the man he had called Weegie, who grabbed me by the upper arm and pushed me into line behind the others. I stumbled a couple of times, but with the soldiers' powerful search beams to see by the going was actually much easier. Now that it seemed they were not going to kill me or at least not immediately my panic had subsided somewhat. I thought back to the night before, when I had lain comfortably in bed contemplating my forthcoming visit to Andrews and the state of my political morals. It seemed impossible that a mere twenty-four hours could alter my life so completely. I felt inclined to agree with the officer: I had been bloody stupid.

We marched through the forest for about an hour. I was exhausted by then, my mind empty of anything but the desire to stop moving and lie down. At last there were lights, shining

to meet us through the trees. The forest ended suddenly at a barbed wire perimeter fence, and I realised we had arrived outside the hospital.

I was too tired to be afraid. I was marched through a set of iron gates then led along a green-tiled corridor that smelled faintly of damp clothes and disinfectant. Unbelievably it reminded me of school. I caught glimpses of a kit store, and a rec room, where soldiers sprawled on bunks watching a televised boxing match. At the end of the corridor a short flight of concrete steps led down to what was clearly a cell block. The officer-in-charge nudged open one of the mesh-strengthened doors and gestured me inside.

"I'd get some kip, if I were you. I'd bring you some grub, only the mess will have shut up shop, so you'll have to hang on till morning."

I stepped through the door, which was immediately banged shut behind me. I heard the sound of a key being turned in the lock and then the soldier's footsteps trudging back up the stairs. Then there was silence. I stood where I was for a moment, wondering if anything else would happen. The room I was in was small, although curiously it still had the wallpaper and curtains left behind from the time before the soldiers had taken over. The way the wainscoting and ceiling architrave had been divided made it clear that the cell had been partitioned off from a much larger room, possibly the doctors' lounge. There was a bed pushed up against one wall, a metal-framed cot of the kind that is usual in hospitals. In the corner was a bucket and basin, crudely screened from the rest of the room by a section of cotton sheeting strung from a pole. The windows behind their curtains were barred from the outside.

I relieved myself in the bucket then lay down on the bed. It bowed heavily under my weight, the springs weary from decades of use. The room was lit by a single bulb, a bald, enervating glare that I supposed would be left burning all night, although when I tentatively pressed a switch by the bed the light went out. In contrast with the alien blackness of the forest I found the darkness of the room gave me a feeling of being protected. I lay under the threadbare blanket, listening to the silence and wondering what was going to happen to me. I was a prisoner, but what was I being imprisoned for? If it was a simple matter of breaking the curfew then I could expect a hefty fine and perhaps three months behind bars, as well as the wholly undesirable possibility of finding myself under continued surveillance. This could lead to all sorts of problems at work, not just for me but for my colleagues. Certainly it was no laughing matter, but it was at least a situation with navigable parameters. The thing was, I knew my situation was not that simple. I had witnessed a murder, the gunning down in cold blood of a defenceless and vulnerable woman. The frightful injuries that had been inflicted upon her before that hardly served to make things less complicated.

There was also the fact of my visit to Owen Andrews, a troublemaker who by his own admission had been repeatedly in conflict with the state.

What if all things considered it seemed simpler just to get rid of me? Now that Miranda was dead there would be few who cared enough to risk asking questions. Dora might ask, she might even look for me, but in the end she would weigh

up the cost of the truth about a dead man and the price of her own safety and Ray's and find the balance wanting. I did not blame her for it.

Asking questions was out of fashion in our day and age.

I wondered if they would simply shoot me, or if perhaps they would use me in one of their time travel experiments. I presumed the latter. To shoot me would be a waste of valuable resources.

I thought of the mutant girl in the forest, twisted and bent by her exposure to the time stasis almost beyond the bounds of her humanity. I still found it difficult to contemplate her isolation, the loneliness and horror she must have suffered at the moment of her realisation of what had been done to her. It came to me that there were fates worse than shooting. I even wondered if her death at the hands of the soldiers had been for the best.

All at once the darkness of the room seemed oppressive rather than soothing. I put the light back on and got up from the bed. I paced about my cell, examining the barred window and testing the door handle, wondering if I might discover some means of escape but for all its ramshackleness the room was still a prison. I placed my ear against the door and listened, straining for any sound that might give a clue as to what was happening in the rest of the hospital but there was nothing, just a deep, eerie silence that suggested I was completely alone there. I knew this had to be nonsense: I had seen the rec room, the soldiers on their bunks watching television and playing cards. I supposed the cell had been soundproofed somehow. The thought was not exactly comforting.

In the end I decided the only thing for it was to take advantage of the silence and get some rest. Now that my life was not being directly threatened I found I was ravenously hungry – it was hours since the meal at Andrews's house – but there was nothing I could do about that. I drank some water instead from the tap in the corner. It had a peaty taste and was unpleasantly tepid but it helped to put something at least inside my stomach. After drinking I lay back down on the bed and covered myself with the blanket. I thought I would lie there awake for hours but I fell asleep in less than five minutes.

At some point during the night I was woken by the sound of shouting and running footsteps but no one came to my door and I decided I must have dreamed it. I closed my eyes, hovering on the boundary between sleep and waking, a citizen of both nations but unable to settle permanently in either. I saw sleep as an immense blue forest that I was afraid to enter in case I never found the way out again. Then I woke with a start to bright sunlight, and realised I had been asleep all along.

My watch had stopped, but from the position of the sun in the sky I could tell it was already mid-morning, getting on towards midday even. It struck me as curious to say the least that I had been allowed to sleep so long. Surely by now whoever was in charge here would have wanted me either interrogated or – out of their way? The second strange thing was the sun itself, its insistent presence. The day before had been overcast with the promise of rain, a typical day in late March. The sky that was now on the other side of the barred window was spotless, the heady azure of June or July.

I knew it was impossible, but the vagueness and confusion of mind that so often accompanies a sudden waking suggested to

me that *I had been forgotten*, left locked in this room for weeks, that no one was coming now, ever.

I leapt from the bed, relieved myself once again in the stinking bucket, then crossed to the door, prepared to rattle it and shout until someone came. I seized the handle, twisting it sharply downwards.

The door opened smoothly and silently in my hand.

I eased it open a crack and peered out into the corridor. I was prepared for a burst of shouting or even of gunfire, but there was nothing, just the silence of my room, magnified in some queer sense by the largeness of the space it now flowed into. There was nothing in the corridor, just a single plastic chair, as if once, many days before, someone had stood guard there but had long since become bored or assigned to other duties and wandered away. The doors to the other cells stood closed. I stepped out into the corridor, my footsteps echoing on the bare cement floor. I tried the door to the room next to mine, and like mine it swung open easily. I was afraid of what I might find on the other side, but what I found in fact was nothing at all. The bed had been stripped of all its furnishings, including the mattress. There was a slops bucket but it was empty and perfectly dry. Beside it stood a pile of old newspapers. I glanced down at the one on top. The headline story, about Clive Billings losing his seat in a by-election in Harrogate, did not make sense. The paper was brittle and yellow from sun exposure and dated two years previously. I could remember the by-election to which it referred – who could not? It was the by-election that effectively made Billings prime minister – but it had happened more than two decades ago, just as I was about to enter university. Billings had taken the seat with a huge majority.

Looking at the headline made me feel odd, and the idea of actually touching the paper made me feel queasy, off-kilter in a way I could not properly explain. I felt that touching the newspaper would connect me to it as an object, that I would somehow be ratifying the version of reality it was presenting to me, a reality I knew full well had never happened. It would be as if I were somehow negating my own existence.

I left the room quickly, passing up the short stone staircase into the rest of the hospital. The place was empty, not derelict yet but certainly abandoned. The soldiers' rec room was stacked with refuse, dismantled beds and plastic chairs like the one I had seen in the corridor. There were signs everywhere of encroaching damp and roof leakage, peeling wallpaper and buckled linoleum. One more winter without proper attention and the place would sink inexorably into decay.

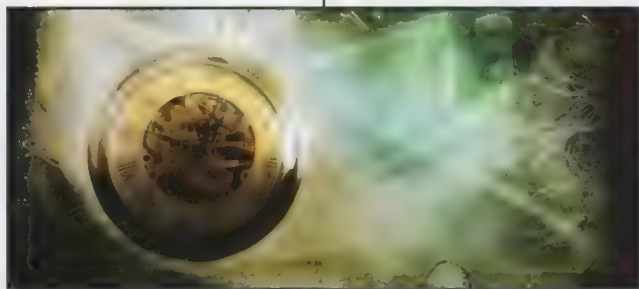
The main doors had been boarded over but after hunting around for a while I found a side entrance and made my escape. The hospital grounds were a wilderness, the paths choked with weeds and many of the smaller outbuildings partially hidden by stands of rampaging bramble and giant hogweed. Beyond the perimeter wall the trees loomed, whispering together with the passing of the breeze. In spite of the emptiness of the place and the fact that I was plainly alone there I felt exposed, watched, as if the trees themselves were spying on me.

The army checkpoint at the entrance had disappeared and the place was unguarded but the high gates were chained shut and it took me some time to find an exit. The perimeter wall was too high to climb without assistance, and I was just starting

to think about going in search of a ladder when I discovered a rent in the small section of chain link fencing that blocked off the access to the service alleyway at the side of the building. The torn wire snagged at my clothes, and in spite of everything I smiled to myself, thinking how the breach was most likely the work of schoolchildren for whom this place now as then would be a realm of dares and bribes, of dangers both imaginary and real. I felt glad that they had broken through, that some of them at least had been braver and bolder than I.

I came out of the alleyway and wandered down to the main road. I tried to look nonchalant, not wanting to draw attention to my soiled clothes and general unkemptness. There was a bus stop by the hospital gates, just as before, and after only ten minutes of waiting a bus drew up to it. I got on, swiping my Oyster card. The sensor responded with its usual bleep. The driver did not look at me twice. I noticed with a start that she was black; I could not remember the last time I had seen a black face in *any* position of public service in this country. The bus was full of soldiers, their London accents blending noisily together as they exchanged ribald jokes and squabbled over newspapers and cigarettes. They were white and black and Asian, as racially mixed as the cowed hordes of deportees in the television broadcasts of my adolescence. I stared at them, barely understanding what I was seeing.

"Lost something, mate?" one of them said to me. "Only if you have, then one of these has probably already nicked it." He looked Middle Eastern in origin. One of his eyebrows was pierced with a diamond stud. The rest of his company erupted in laughter, but it all seemed pretty good-natured and they had soon forgotten me. The bus grunted then lurched off along the road. The woodland seemed to sing with colour and light.



When I arrived at my house on Frobisher Street the key would not fit in the lock. By then I was not surprised. I had even been expecting something of this kind. I rang the bell, and after a minute or so the door was opened by a young woman. Her hair looked uncombed, her eyes dark from fatigue. A child clung to her knees, a boy of perhaps four or five. In contrast with the woman's scruffy housedress the toddler wore a clean-ly-pressed playsuit in a cheerful mix of blues and yellows.

"Yes?" she said. "Can I help you?"

I peered over her shoulder into the hall. The black-and-white tiles had been replaced by a dun-coloured carpet. Piles of washing stood heaped at the foot of the stairs.

"How long have you lived here?" I said. The woman took a sudden step backwards, almost tripping over the child. She ran a hand through her hair, and I saw that all her nails were bitten.

"We're registered," she said. "We've been here almost two years. I've got all the forms." Before I could say anything else she had darted away inside the house, disappearing through the door that had once led to my own living room. The toddler stared up at me, his green eyes wide with fascination.

"Are you from the prison?" he said.

"Not at all," I replied. "This used to be my house once, that's all. I wanted to see if it had changed."

He continued to gaze at me as if I were a visitor from another planet. As I stood there wondering whether to stay or go the woman returned. "Here you are," she said. "They're all up to date." She thrust some papers at me. I glanced at them briefly, long enough to see that her name was Violet Jane Pullinger and she had been born in Manchester, then handed them back.

"It's all right," I said. "I'm not from the council or anything. I used to live round here, that's all. I was just curious. I'm sorry if I scared you. I didn't mean to."

The little boy looked from me to the woman and slowly back again. "He says he's not from the prison, mum. Do you think he's my dad?"

"Stephen!" She touched the boy's hair, her face caught somewhere between laughter and embarrassment. When she looked at me again she looked younger and less frightened. "I don't know where they get their ideas from, do you? Would you like to come in? I could make us a cup of tea?"

"That's very kind," I said. "But I've taken up too much of your time already."

I knew I could not enter the house, that to do so would be a kind of madness. I said a hurried goodbye then turned and walked back to the High Street. I thought about looking to see if my office was still there but my nerve failed me. I went to the cashpoint outside my bank instead. I inserted my card in the machine and typed in my PIN. I felt certain the card would be swallowed or rejected. If that happened I was not only homeless, I was penniless too, aside from the couple of notes that were still in my wallet. I peered at the little screen, wondering what I would do if that happened, but this was one decision I did not have to make. My debit card, apparently, was still valid. When the machine asked me which service I required I selected CASH WITH ON-SCREEN BALANCE, then when prompted I requested twenty pounds. It seemed a safe enough amount, at least to start with. I waited while the note was disgorged, staring intently at the fluorescent panel where my bank balance was about to be displayed.

When the figure finally appeared I gasped, inhaling so sharply that it set off a fit of coughing. The amount I apparently had in my account was four times the sum that had been in there the day before. It did not make me a rich man by any means, but for a weary time traveller without a roof over his head it certainly provided a measure of temporary security.

I went to the nearest shop, a corner newsagent's, where I bought a newspaper and a wrapped falafel. I ate the falafel where I stood on the street, wolfing it down in three bites then wiping my fingers on the greaseproof paper. Then I headed for the Woolwich Road and a hotel I knew, an enormous Victorian pile that had always been frequented mainly by travelling salesmen and had something of a dubious reputation. Its reputation mattered very little to me right then; what I needed was a bed

for the night, some time to think in a place where I would not be noticed.

The hotel was still there and still a hotel. It looked more down-at-heel than ever. Some of the rooms on the ground floor appeared to have been converted into long-stay bedsitters. There was a pervasive smell of cooking fat and stewed tomatoes.

"I don't do breakfast," said the landlady. "You get that yourself, out the back." She was huge, a vast whale of a woman in a flowered print dress with the most extraordinary violet eyes I had ever seen. I told her that was fine. She looked vaguely familiar, and I wondered what she would look like with her hair down. I shook my head to clear it and headed upstairs. The upper landing was sweltering and my poky little room was no better but I didn't care. I sat down on the bed, which creaked alarmingly; it seemed strange how much this room, with its faded wallpaper and antiquated washstand, resembled the hospital cell where I had spent the previous night.

As well as the bed and the washstand there was a battered mahogany wardrobe and a portable television set with an old-fashioned loop aerial. I opened the window, hoping to let some air into the room, and then switched on the TV. The six o'clock news had just started. There was footage of a refugee encampment like those I had seen previously in Tangier and Sangatte. I was amazed to learn that the camp, a ragged shanty town of tents and standpipes and semi-feral children as skinny as rails, was situated on the outskirts of Milton Keynes. A delegation from the camp had delivered a petition to Downing Street, and the prime minister himself appeared on the steps to receive it.

The prime minister was black, a slimly-built, earnest-faced man named Ottmar Chingwe. I had never seen him before in my life.

I watched the broadcast through to the end. Some of the items covered – the famine in Russia, the blockade in the Gulf – were familiar or at least they seemed to be at first but other events, reported in the same matter-of-fact tone, were like passages from some elaborate fantasy. The newspaper I had bought was the same. I felt dazed not so much by the scale of the changes as by their subtlety. There were no miracle machines, no robots, no flying saucers; in many ways the world I had entered was the same as the world I had left. What I saw and felt and observed was a change not in substance but in *emphasis*.

Was it this that the Billings regime had learned of, and sought to reverse? Certainly Billings's world view – his 'Fortress Britain,' as he had proudly referred to it – was everywhere conspicuous by its absence. This new England seemed more like a gipsy encampment, a vast airport lounge of peoples, chaotic and noisy and continually on the move. There seemed to be no overall plan.

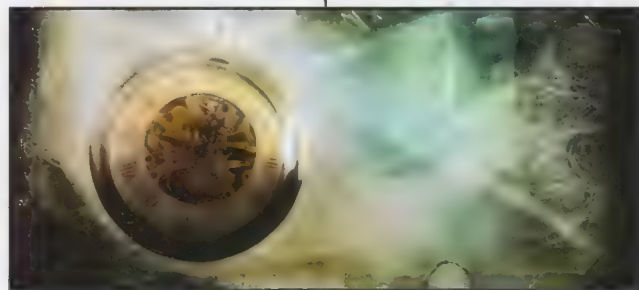
Yet commerce was active, the homeless were being fed. People of all shades of opinion were expressing those opinions robustly and at every opportunity.

It was like the London I remembered from when I was young.

I watched TV for about an hour then went down to the curry house opposite and ordered a meal. I ate it quickly, still feeling conspicuous, although none of the other diners paid me the slightest attention. Once I had finished I returned to the hotel. There was a pay telephone in the hallway. I inserted my card and dialled Dora's number. The phone rang and rang, and was

eventually answered by a woman with an Eastern European accent so strong I could barely understand what she was saying. Silently I replaced the receiver.

After a moment's hesitation I lifted it again, this time dialling Owen Andrews's number, reading it off the slip of paper in my wallet. The phone clicked twice and then went dead. I climbed the stairs to my room and watched television into the small hours, trying to gather as many facts as I could about my new world. Eventually I turned out the light and went to sleep.



I had to keep reminding myself that this was not the

future. That is, I had lost three months somewhere but that was all. The year was the same. The TV channels were more or less the same. The Shooter's Hill Road was still rife with car-jackings, only now there was no talk of reinstating the death penalty. The increase in my finances I put down to some lucky quirk, an error in accounting, if you like, between one version of reality and another.

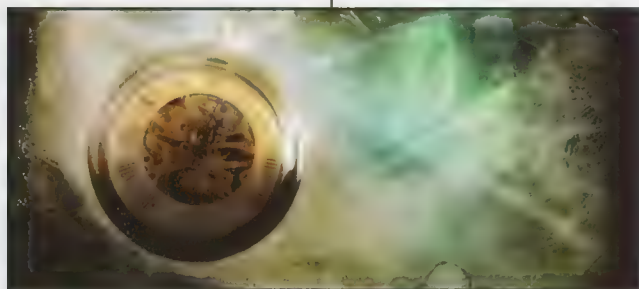
Once my initial nervousness had begun to wear off my biggest fear was meeting myself. It was the kind of nightmare you read about in H.G. Wells, but Owen Andrews had not mentioned it and in any case it did not happen. I began to wonder if each reality was like Schrödinger's theoretical box, its contents uncertain until it was actually opened. I thought that perhaps the very act of me entering this world somehow negated any previous existence I had had within it.

Such thoughts were unnerving yet fascinating, the kind of ideas I would have liked to discuss with Owen Andrews. But so far as I could determine Andrews did not exist here.

I returned to what I was good at, which was buying and selling. I was still nervous in those early days, afraid to expose myself through some stupid mistake, and so instead of applying for a job with an estate agent I decided to set up by myself selling watches and clocks. I enjoyed reading up on the subject and it wasn't long before I had a lucrative little business. I had learned long ago that even during the worst times there are still rich people, and what do the rich have to do but spend their money on expensive luxuries? I had never lost sleep over this; rather I made good use of it. I was amused to find that some of my clients were people I knew from before, men whose houses I had once sold for them, or their sons or daughters, or people who looked very like them. None of them recognised me.

The only thing I had left from my old life was the photograph of Miranda that I had always carried in my wallet. It was a snapshot taken of her on Brighton beach soon after we married. Her topaz eyes were lifted towards the camera, her heart-shaped face partially obscured by silvery corkscrewed wisps of

her windblown hair. It was like an answered prayer, to have her with me. There were no traces of her death now, no evidence of what had happened. All that remained was my knowledge of my love for her and this last precious image of her face.



One evening in September I left a probate sale I had been attending in Camden and walked towards the tube station at St John's Wood. It was growing dusk, and I stopped for a moment to enjoy the view from the top of Primrose Hill. The sky in the west was a fierce red, what I took to be the afterglow of sunset, but later, at home, when I put on the radio I discovered there had been a fire. The report said that underground fuel stores at the old army hospital at Shooter's Hill had mysteriously ignited, causing them to explode. The resulting conflagration had been visible for twenty miles.

The Royal Herbert was a listed building, said the newscaster. It was originally built for the Woolwich Garrison at the end of the eighteen eighties and was most recently in use as a long-stay

care facility for victims of war trauma.

The police suspected arson and had already sent in their teams of investigators. I wished them luck in their search. I supposed they would find something eventually, some loose circuitry or faulty shielding, but felt certain that unless they were experts in tracking a crime from one region of reality to another they would never find out the real truth of what had happened.

What I believed was that the resistance fighters Andrews told me about had finally found a way to destroy the hospital. The blast had been so strong it had ripped through the time stasis, wiping the building off the map in all versions of reality simultaneously.

Or in the neighbouring zones, at least. For a moment I had a vision of the great hotel lobby of time Andrews had spoken of. Alarm bells clamoured as a line of porters shepherded the guests out on to the front concourse and a fire crew worked to extinguish a minor blaze in one of the bedrooms. The fire was soon put out, the loss adjusters called in to assess the damage. By the end of the evening the guests were back in the bar and it was business as usual.

Some old biddy's cigarette, apparently, said one as he sipped at his scotch.

We're lucky she didn't roast us in our beds, his companion jabbered excitedly. D'you fancy some peanuts?

I supposed that my escape route, if there had ever been one, was now cut off for good. Perhaps this should have bothered me but it didn't. The more time passed, the more it was my old life that seemed unreal, a kind of nightmare aberration, a bad

MAT COWARD'S 'SUCCESS...AND HOW TO AVOID IT'



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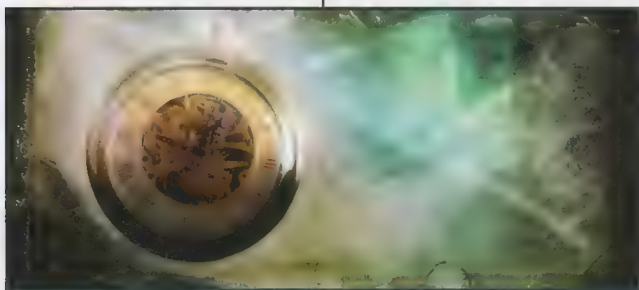
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photocopy of reality rather than the master version. The world I now inhabited, for all its rough edges, felt more substantial.

I had no wish to return to the way things were. I uncorked a bottle of wine – the dreadful rough Burgundy that was all you could find in the shops at the time because of the flight embargo – and drank a silent toast to the unknown bombers. I thought of the soldiers in their rec room, their harmless card games and noisy camaraderie, and hoped they had been able to escape before the place went up.



It was not until some years later that I stumbled up- on the picture of Owen Andrews. It was in a book someone had given me about the London watch trade, a reproduction of a nineteenth century daguerreotype that showed Andrews at his work bench. He was wearing a baggy white workman's blouse and had his loupe on a leather cord around his neck.

The caption named him as Mr Edwin Andrews, the 'miracle dwarf' who had successfully perfected a number of new ad-

vancements in the science of mechanics and with particular reference to the Breguet tourbillon.

It was him, without a shadow of a doubt. I studied the picture, wondering what Andrews had made of being called a miracle dwarf. I supposed he would have had a good laugh.

The text that went with the picture said that Andrews had held a position in the physical sciences department at Oxford University but that he had resigned the post as the result of a disagreement with his superiors. He had come to London soon afterwards, setting up his own workshop in Southwark.

Sometimes, on those light summer evenings when I had finished all my appointments and had nothing better to do, I would make my way to Paddington and eat a leisurely supper in one of the bars or cafes on the station concourse. I watched the great steam locomotives as they came and went from the platforms, arriving and departing for towns in the north and west. A train came in from Oxford every half hour.

I knew it was futile to wait but I waited anyway. Andrews had said we would meet again and I somehow believed him. I sipped my drink and scanned the faces in the crowd, hoping that one of them one day would be the face of my friend.

Along with 'Wilkolak,' which appears in the current issue of *Interzone's* sister magazine *Crimewave* (#11, subtitled *Ghosts*), 'The Silver Wind' is firmly rooted in the wilds of South East London. Nina is very much in love with her immediate neighbourhood, and feels it to be unjustly neglected – although some may say her skewed perspectives are unlikely to bring the tourists flocking any time soon. The story also reunites readers with Martin, the hero of 'My Brother's Keeper' from *Black Static* issue 12.


WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE'S 'PLAYGROUND (HIDE AND SEEK)'



Warwick Fraser-Coombe's six covers for the 2010 issues of *Interzone* combine to form 'Playground (Hide and Seek)' and it is now available to purchase as a high quality print

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Chris Butler lives and writes on the south coast of England. His published fiction includes the novel *Any Time Now*, and short stories in *Asimov's*, *The Immersion Book of SF*, and *Nature*. His most recent appearance in *Interzone* was in issue 224 with the very well received 'The Festival of Tethselem'. Visit Chris at www.chris-butler.co.uk.

CHRIS BUTLER

TELL ME EVERYTHING

It was raining the night Sandra died. Remember that, it's important.

I stared at my own handwriting from a year ago. This was written in my own file, not in the official case file because I was not officially allowed to work on the case.

I shook my head, picked up my towel and wiped a layer of sweat from the back of my neck. Stein police house was packed with people, a coiling mist of spores and voices bubbling up through the hot, stuffy air, telling stories of guilt, regret, and denial.

A runner dropped a new assignment pack on my desk. The Summer Duke required a bodyguard at an evening social function. I knew this would be coming in; a quiet word in the ear of the assignment clerk earlier that day had ensured the job came to me. I grabbed my jacket.

"Heading out, Mack?" The desk officer looked at me like I was the lucky one.

"Yes," I said, and signed out.

On the street I sniffed the air. A hit of breezy confidence and happiness made me turn to my right. A group of men dressed in smart business suits walked past me, laughing with each other. There was a subtle undertow of jealousy in the mix of spores, one of them not as happy as the rest. They sat down at a café table.

I hailed a rickshaw and headed over to the law offices. When I got there the Duke's carriage was waiting for me and I was ushered inside.

"Detective Mack," he said.

"Your Grace," I replied.

The air inside was thick with his spores, the man's power and presence unmistakable and overwhelming. It was all I could do to stay calm, attempt indifference. He smiled as he looked down his nose at me.

The party went without incident for the first hour. As each guest arrived I assessed the subtle change in the spores mixing in the room, sensitive to the ebb and flow. This was what made a good policeman, this sensitivity I had. Someone like the Duke simply overpowered everyone else in the room, demanding the deference he expected.

No one noticed when Maxim Crowe entered. He was almost invisible, except to the eye. None of the spores in the room came from him. Eventually others began to notice, and I detected a gradual build up of suspicion and confusion.

The Summer Duke had been discussing some political matter, but I saw him rise from his seat and cross the room towards Crowe. I fell in beside him, finding it hard not to recoil from the wave of anger emanating from him. More than anger, it was outrage.

"What are you doing?" the Duke asked of him.

At first Crowe did not reply, and I thought, *Is he determined to hold even his voice invisible?*

"Doing?"

Another wave of animosity flared from the Duke. Crowe flinched momentarily. "How exactly are you doing that?" the Duke asked.

"I apologise, Your Grace, it is a medical condition. I cannot—"

For me, trying to deduce Crowe's mood from his voice and facial expression alone was difficult to the point of being exhausting, but I supposed he was just as intimidated by the Duke as the rest of us.

"Preposterous," the Duke said. "Show yourself at once."

When I say the Duke expected to see deference from everyone around him, I mean that he actually did see it, in the spores of everyone he met. The absence of this from Crowe was an insult.

I swear I saw a bead of sweat on Crowe's brow, but then it

vanished like he'd sucked it back inside, as if he would allow nothing to escape the surface of his skin.

Crowe said, "My apologies, but there is nothing I can do. It is late, I think I will retire for the evening."

"Go," the Duke said, "get out of my sight before I have you arrested."

Crowe bowed deeply and walked out of the room. I did not think there was any specific law applicable, although perhaps there was scope for some new interpretation of laws regarding full disclosure of information to the courts.

A pose of indifference came over the Duke, but for once his spores betrayed him, at least to me. His anger was palpable.

I returned with him to the law offices. As I began to climb down from the carriage he grabbed my arm and said, "Find out about that man."

"I'm sure he is no one, really," I said.

"I want him investigated. He's hiding something."

"If you wish it," I said.

"You'll handle it?"

There was no scope for dissent in his presence. "Of course," I said.

I climbed down, and the carriage whisked him away in the direction of his home. A cold sweat soaked my skin, but after a few moments alone with the fresh night around me I felt a calm sense of satisfaction. Everything was going to plan.

I knocked gently on the door of Cassie's room and went in. She lay on her bed like a bundle of sticks, her thin arms and legs sticking out of shorts and vest.

"Cassie Mack," I said, "what do you think you're doing?"

She shrugged. "Hi Dad."

I went in and sat down on the bed next to her. She sat up and gave me a hug. "I was waiting for you to come home. Do you mind?"

"I'll have to have words with Ola. You can't stay up all night."

Ola is our maid and looks after Cassie when work keeps me out late. "But no," I said, relenting, "I don't mind."

I persuaded Cassie to extinguish her bedside lamp and went back to the living room on my own. The days were hot and humid but the nights cold at this time of year. Ola and Cassie had lit a fire and its remnants still smouldered in the fireplace. I poured a drink and stared into the dying embers, remembering the day we pulled my wife's body from the wreck of the carriage, out on the bend up by the cliffs. It had come to rest at the base of a hill, below the road, apparently after rolling over several times. The body lay broken and lifeless inside the carriage. We found the driver higher up where he must have been thrown clear, also dead.

It had rained heavily through the night till the wreckage was spotted in the morning. No other spores were detected in or around the carriage, only hers. Nothing traceable on the road either.

I cycled out to Crowe's address, a rundown place on the outskirts of town. I wiped sweat from the back of my neck and draped the towel over the handlebars. Not much chance of it drying out in this humid air, though. I went up the path to the house and knocked on the screen door.

It was late morning but Crowe looked like he'd only just got out of bed. He looked like a man with a hangover, but the mix of spores that would normally accompany that condition was entirely absent.

"I'm with the police. Detective Mack." I held out my ID card. "Could I come in for a few minutes?"

"What's this about?"

"Can we talk inside?"

He looked reluctant but eventually invited me in. The inside of the house was as unkempt as the outside. Ordinarily I'd look for some sense of shame or embarrassment from someone living like this, but as before I got nothing from him. The complete lack of spores in the room was almost dizzying, like all the air had been sucked out.

"Lived here long?" I asked.

With anyone else, asking a harmless question I already knew the answer to would be a deliberate strategy to measure the cooperativeness of the subject. Always start with a question that can be answered truthfully. In this case I was just trying to engage with him. After all, if you're using someone, the least you can do is look him in the eye as you do it. I wiped a finger across the mantelpiece, gouging a trail in the dust. I wondered if he could read my guilt. How sensitive was *he*, this man who kept everything inside?

"A while," he said. "You were at that party last night. Am I in some kind of trouble?"

I continued round the room, taking everything in. A lone houseplant had leaves turning brown at the edges. I glanced into the kitchen and saw dishes piling up in the sink. I turned to face him. "You ruffled a few feathers last night."

"I didn't mean to."

"You may as well have had a mask over your head. This thing you're doing, it isn't normal."

"I am not *doing* anything. It is a medical condition."

"So you said. I'll need the name of your doctor."

"Why? Why does it even matter? What business is it of yours to know what I am feeling every second of the day, every last detail?"

I shrugged. "People who are not guilty of anything have nothing to worry about."

Was that anger I saw in his face? Probably.

He said, "Everyone's guilty of something, right?"

"The police house is full of it every day." Was I thinking only of the criminals, or myself too? "I've been instructed to take a close look at you. I have no problem doing that. You want to save me the effort? Anything you want to tell me now?"

He shook his head. "I don't have a local doctor. I only moved here a while ago. I didn't register yet. I'll find the address of the last one I had."

He opened up a desk, took out a notebook and copied out the address for me.

"Thanks," I said. "One thing I was wondering, how did you come to be at that party last night?"

"I was invited."

"How? Who by?"

He picked up a coat from where it had been cast over the back of a chair, pulled an envelope from the pocket and handed it to me.

"I don't know why it was sent to me, but I thought it would be an opportunity. Maybe I'd meet someone there who could help me. I could use a job, you know?"

"And you expected to make a good impression, did you, by irritating everyone in the room?"

He looked a little crestfallen. "This is who I am," he said. "I shouldn't have to feel ashamed."

I held up the invitation. "Mind if I take this?"

He shook his head. "Take it," he said.

I'd played it well. I hadn't got much from Crowe, but I got what I came for. I stuffed the envelope into my pocket and left.

I lay on the ground in the dark, covered head to toe in waterproof clothing, while the rain lashed down. Rain washes spores out of the air, so no one will ever know I was here. Police-men love the rain when we're doing something we shouldn't. We hate it when criminals use it for the same purpose.

I had a good position hidden amongst a line of trees, with binoculars trained on the back of the house below. He poured himself a drink from a decanter. He had a habit of adjusting things as he moved about the house, like he wanted everything to be just perfect. This was a man who would not appreciate something out of place, a challenge to the expected way of things.

He had a woman with him. She turned around and he unzipped her dress. She walked away from him and he followed after. Upstairs the curtains were closed so I couldn't see any more. The cold was getting to be too much for me anyway, the rain falling like ice. I had a long journey back to my house and needed to get there before daylight.

When I walked through the door I found myself unexpectedly standing face to face with Cassie. I was dripping wet and she was standing at the bottom of the stairs in her pyjamas.

"I've been working," I said.

"Which one of them were you spying on?" she asked.

How much did she know? How much of what I was doing was transparent to someone as close to me as she was? Someone who could taste my spores on the air when my guard was down?

"The Summer Duke," I said. If I'd told a lie she would have known, so I went with the truth.

She nodded. "Be careful," she said. Then she gave me a quick hug and climbed the stairs.

Before going to bed myself I took the time to stow away my waterproofs and clean my boots.

It is impossible even to question him.

I stared at another note written in my version of the case file. Of course I didn't say which 'him' I was referring to. If the file were ever scrutinised by anyone, well, people have disappeared for less.

I returned to that road many times, that particular curve. We asked for information from anyone travelling the route that night. We questioned many, but all to no avail. There was one man we did not question: the Duke himself.

I know he took that road regularly, almost every night, I suspect to see a woman. The man who drove for him that night vanished entirely before I could question him. The Duke's jour-

neys along that route also came to an abrupt halt. That is too big a coincidence for a man in my profession.

Many times I stood before the Duke with the righteous intention to ask him, *What were you doing on the road that night, Your Grace?*

Each time the mere presence of him, the overpowering nature of his spores, his status as one of the four most powerful men in the city, prevented me from challenging him. And the only benefit of my impotence is that my animosity towards him would also vanish when I stood before him, crushed into submission, so he never saw anything in me except the subservience he expected.

So, if direct confrontation was impossible, I knew I would have to take a subtler approach. If I had to scheme, that was precisely what I would do.

The Duke allowed me a few days to investigate Maxim Crowe and then summoned me to his chambers.

"A progress report, please."

He strutted up and down, the air electric with spores like a storm about to break. They were such opposites, the Summer Duke and Maxim Crowe, but of course that was entirely the point.

"Crowe continues to claim he has a medical condition," I said. "I have not yet traced the doctor he claims can verify his history."

In many ways this was the biggest gamble I had yet taken. The reason I had not traced the doctor was because I had not tried. I was telling the truth, in a way, but I was also being deceptive. Pulling this off while in the presence of the Duke was difficult. To do so without him noticing was more difficult still, but I need not have worried on that score because he was too obsessed with Crowe to care what I was thinking.

"We should examine him ourselves," the Duke said.

"Is that ethical?" I asked mildly.

"This man tells lies and may be a danger to all of us. Arrest him at once. I will instruct my personal physician to examine him."

They strapped Crowe to a gurney in one of our inter-view rooms. A very unorthodox use of our facilities. The Duke and I watched from the other side of a one-way mirror, while the doctor shook his head unhappily and continued to prod at Crowe with a variety of devices.

"I should be in there," the Duke said. "I can't smell him."

"You would taint the room," I pointed out.

He huffed and leaned forward, peering through the glass.

The doctor said, "I will now test the pain response." He picked up a device that looked like some kind of vice. I could not see exactly what he did. Crowe screamed.

When the doctor came to talk to us he confirmed that Crowe was generating no spores, but he could find no medical reason for this. He said there had been documented cases where spore production had apparently stopped during mental illness, but no one had ever heard of anyone being able to consciously suppress spore production. If some kind of subconscious trauma were responsible, restoring normal behaviour should simply be a matter of making the subject believe that the deviant behav-

our is less 'safe' than the normal. But so far, Crowe's condition had not changed even under extreme duress.

"The duress is not extreme enough, then," the Duke said.

The punches kept landing. The Duke had two of his own men do it, while he and I watched.

"Confess," I urged Crowe. "Confess while you still can."

Blood dripped from his mouth. "To what? Tell me and I will confess."

The Duke stepped closer. "Confess you intended to harm me."

"All right then, yes," Crowe said. "I intended to harm you."

The Duke sighed. "All you give me are words. This is not convincing to me."

"But –"

"You know what I want," the Duke said.

Crowe looked at him helplessly.

"Take him to the roof," the Duke said. "If he doesn't give me what I want, throw him off."

The two thugs grabbed Crowe, one at each arm, and dragged him to the spiral staircase leading up to the roof.

The wind whipped around us on the rooftop. Crowe stood shivering, facing us, out near the edge. There were only minutes of light left in the day.

Oh God, this was not what I intended.

Some months before, I asked myself, how could the Duke ever be brought to justice? I believed he was responsible for my wife's death. My theory was that his carriage had forced hers from the road. He had not stopped to help her, or bothered to report the event. He had just driven on, leaving her to die. It was not that he wanted her dead, simply that he did not care one way or the other.

I considered attempting to enlist the help of one of the other Dukes, but knew that would only lead to my own swift execution. So, how else might I proceed? The answer must lie with the spores. Perhaps an immunity might be created somehow. I researched every known medical fact about them. I became an expert in the matter, though I will never be acknowledged as such. I did not find any immunity, but I did find Maxim Crowe.

No doctor wanted to be associated with him, but one had carelessly made minor mention of his condition. The kind of mention that could be expected to be filed unnoticed, but I was looking for just such a thing.

"Show yourself," the Duke said again to Crowe, "or I *will* have you thrown off this roof."

Part of the power of a man like the Summer Duke, is the reaction in others. The less powerful radiate subservience in their spores, which serves only to reinforce the confidence of the more powerful. How then might the Duke react if he met a man who returned none of the expected subservience?

I knew that such a man would be abhorrent to the Duke. Crowe lived on the fringes of society, but I reasoned he might be tempted by the possibility of acceptance. To bring the two together I forged an invitation.

I had never sought Crowe's death. I only wished to show the Duke that there is a limit to his power. That there are things even he cannot command.

"Your Grace," I said, "this is too public, you will have to explain."

He turned on me. "Detective Mack, weakling, if you do not have the stomach for this, *leave*."

Commanded to leave, I felt compelled to do so at once. But what of Crowe, brought here by my own guile and subterfuge? I could not abandon him. I fell to my knees, unable to do anything except falter.

The Duke gave the order and the two men moved towards Crowe. I knew they meant to throw him from the roof, and I believe Crowe knew it too.

I turned my head and made eye contact with Crowe. There was an exchange between us that is hard to describe for it was so subtle a thing: a look, an understanding, a letting go. Something altered in Crowe and then the spores flew out of him, like I have never seen before and hope never to feel again, as if a lifetime of pent up sadness and frustration broke out. This blizzard of emotion battered all of us into submission.

I believe something awful happened to Crowe as a child, for that is what it felt like, this outpouring from him, the terror of a child who is helpless and abused.

I was already on my knees, and now the others joined me, struck down in terror. I could hear the Duke repeating, "No, no, no," over and over.

And while each of his persecutors struggled to hold on to sanity, I saw Crowe stand up. Like a man released from all of his burdens he walked away, back down the staircase, never to be seen again.

I spent some days in hospital after that, but eventually I managed to pull myself together again.

Cassie came to see me. "Tell me everything," she said. So I did.

She knew or had guessed most of it already.

"We can try to put this behind us now," I told her.

She shook her head. "Not yet. I hear rumours about the Summer Duke."

So I went to see him, stood before him in his chambers one last time, and I discovered the rumours were true. He was utterly defeated by his encounter with Crowe on the rooftop, all his defences stripped away. The taste of his spores now was like soured milk. People turned up their noses when he entered a room. We had ruined him.

I saw he had no power over me any longer. No power over anyone.

"Summer Duke," I said, astonished, my voice steady. "I wish to question you regarding the death of my wife, Sandra Mack."

He wept as he confessed to me. How his carriage had run hers off the road and how he covered it up. He confessed to other crimes, too.

He rots in jail now.

I didn't expect Maxim Crowe to ever forgive me, but I felt justified in the things I'd done. Do you smell guilt on me? No, I didn't think so. He took my wife from me. He took Cassie's mother. Something had to be done.

The cemetery is a beautiful place, and I visit often. I could always unburden myself to her, and I swear if I listen closely to the breeze I can feel her whisper to me: *Tell me everything.* ♦

Ray Cluley has been published a number of times in our sister magazine *Black Static*, but as you can see he likes to write science fiction, too. This is his first appearance in *Interzone*. He also writes academic pieces for students studying English and teaches at a college in Portsmouth.

RAY CLULEY

TETHERED to the

Two-Nine is hilly terrain to cross on foot. It's tiring work, and treacherous in the dark, but I have to keep going to charge the kin-gen. Without it, if the batteries die I die with them. Even in full outgear. As it is, I've got regulated temperature, zero grade rads, and a nav-com that crackles too often but is otherwise fine. I can't afford to be without any of it.

The first three sigs had taken little under four hours, but the snow is slow going, especially uphill, and the bulk of the outgear makes my movements awkward. The next sig looks to be another hour or so, depending how often I fall. I've fallen plenty already, of course, I always do in this clumsy fucking thing, but no fall has been serious enough to damage the pute. Or change my mind.

— How's it going?

I ignore her. She wants me to tell her how hard it is, tell her she was right, there's nothing out here, it isn't worth it.

— Jackson, answer me.

She actually sounds worried, even over the crackle of static.

— I'm alright, mother. Just. Tired.

— Anything?

— Not so far. But. It's only been. Three signals. He said sixteen.

— He also said he was from Two-Twelve, didn't he, but that was bullshit.

Her intonation adds an unspoken 'too'. There's a moment of blissful quiet after and I'm not ready to spoil it by agreeing. Just because he'd lied about where he'd come from didn't mean he'd lied about everything else.

I pat the chest pocket where I've stored the pill foils, intending to reassure myself they're still there, but I can't feel a thing through the thick rubber layer keeping me alive.

— You got enough synth?

— Yeah.

Of course I do.

— When you get back here, I'll cook one of the slabs.

I smile. She means it as an incentive to abort, and it's a damn effective temptation. My mouth floods with saliva at the thought of hot meat. We eat it rarely, of course, and we have to ration it even more now, but we've eaten recently enough that I can remember the taste and texture.

— Yeah. That sounds good, mother. Going to. Close link a

minute. This bit's. Steep.

And I don't want to hear you remind me of the folly of giving away our meat slabs.

She doesn't need to, though. It's buried in there with the offer.

Again, I pat at where the foils are. Again, I can't feel anything.

"It will be there," I say into the suit. It fogs the vis and there's a hiss as the outgear adjusts to compensate. It sounds like mother's sigh.

The man called Connor had wandered into what was left of Two-Nine when I was watching the screens. Had it been mother on cams I'd never have known about him. She'd grown distrustful of other people since Alph-Alpha. I couldn't blame her for that. The comedian who'd named the farm station was not much fun when the crops failed. In the resulting chaos of his more ill-tempered leadership, those who had been friends became otherwise. A few of us left when people we thought we knew began to show a selfish side (a natural enough development without the promised harvest) and the few of us became two of us by the time we got to what I've come to call home. Just mother and me.

Until Connor.

— Identify.

The man I saw on cams stopped moving. There was a moment I could hear his panting when he opened the link, then:

— Connor. From Two-Twelve. Glad to. Hear a voice.

He panted some more and looked around at the hills. Looking for the eyes I was watching with.

— What happened?

Something must have. Nobody wandered around in outgear for a stroll.

— Give me a sig pulse. I'll come and. Tell you.

I hesitated, hand wavering between com and home sig. I didn't even consider telling mother. When I pressed the home signal booster, it was entirely my own decision.

— Receiving LAC.

— You're about one and a half sigs away. I'll put the kettle on. It surprised some laughter out of him.

— Milk and. Two. Sugars.

I laughed back.

— Loud and clear.

ILLUSTRATED BY PAUL DEMMOND

COLD *and* DYING



I crest yet another hill to find that this time there's only a downward slope. A sig flashes recognition of my tech and a pulse adjusts my nav. I don't need it. I can see where I'm heading easily enough.

The sector starline is intact, just as he'd said. It rises from somewhere distant straight up into somewhere more distant still, right there in front of me. Just a grey pencil line in a grey sky, quickly swallowed by permacloud, but it stands out stark against the snow of the horizon even in the dark of day. As I stare, grinning for no one to see, an L-flow flashes its way up. It traces the starline at a speed designed for human visual and I watch it ascend. It beckons me. Follow me up, up, it says, turning the cloud mass green for a moment before disappearing altogether.

I tap a message to mother, wishing we were still in com range, hoping my told you so is clear enough in numbers. She numbers back, asking about electric light flow. If she's happy, it doesn't show in code. I tap back a yes. By then it has fired again, racing into space and calling me up, up, as it had before. There's still power, which means the elevators should work. All I have to do is get there.

I'm careful to go slow. Clumsy outgear or not, what I want to do is run.

There's nothing else from mother. She knows what I'll do.

Upon his arrival I took Connor a flask-packet but I took it in a mug. When the door to the out room slid up he was stepping free of his gear. It was only a partial suit and badly worn in places, thin about the knees and on the palms. I was dismayed at something else I saw, too, or rather at something I didn't see; the man was travelling with the poorest type of rad-guard. He only wore lead film.

He saw me and smiled. Saw the mug and his eyes went wide. For a moment I think he actually thought it was a hot steaming cup of tea. I relished the joy of his expression, but felt bad for it as well. It was meant to be a light-hearted ice-breaker. Now I felt like I'd offered a child candy only to tell them no.

"Sorry. Just packet stuff." I upended the cup and caught the foil.

"Still the best offer I've had in two days." He smiled. "Hello." He offered his hand, still gloved, and we shook. The pute had said no for rads. Wouldn't be long, though, if he was set on travelling much further dressed like he was. His suit was so thin I could feel the calluses of his hand through the rubber.

"Jackson."

"Connor."

I gave him the drink. "Just you, Connor?"

"Just me." He took the foil, snapped it hard against his knee, then tore a corner. I was amused to see him tip the contents into the mug instead of sucking straight from the packet. It would go cold real quick that way, but worth the laugh we shared.

"What about you? Anyone else at this home post?" He was stripping the belt from his shoulders and shrugging out of the mantle. When he stopped I assumed it was for my answer.

"Me and mother. You'll meet her just as soon as I've told her about you."

Connor indicated behind me with his cup.

"Consider me told," said mother.

She'd come straight from the lab from the looks of her splash-mac, wiping her hand with a medi-cleanser instead of offering it. It wasn't the warmest welcome. She eyed the newcomer, then me, then left. She must have known we were watching her because she slammed her fist against one of the corridor panels and a door hissed down behind her. It was a dramatic exit.

Connor ignored her rudeness and ducked out from the last of his gear, dropping it at his feet. "Not a people person?"

I shrugged. "Not anymore."

"You take more after your dad, I suppose?"

I laughed again. Three times in one day. That was one for the log.

"She's not my mother. I just call her that because she acts like one. An in-law, most the time."

It had started as a joke, the mother thing, back in Alph-Alpha, but it had stuck and neither of us seemed willing to change it. There was probably something psychological there, even with her being so much younger than me, but I wasn't willing to explore that. Unless Connor was a head-tech, I wouldn't have to. Anyway, I had questions of my own.

"What happened at Two-Twelve?"

He didn't answer straight away.

The sign uses a capital S from back when Starline

was a company and not a word all of its own. There's a simple logo, too; a large circle with a vertical line connecting it to a smaller circle above. When I get closer I see the slogan. **THE SKY'S THE LIMIT NO LONGER.** It seems pathetically prophetic now, sadly pessimistic without meaning to be.

"Going up to go forward," I manage, singing the jingle with one breath, surprising myself by remembering the tune. The outgear hisses disapproval as it compensates for the exhalation.

Starline had been the first company. They made a lot of money, not that it mattered in the end, and invited other countries to get involved, invited all sorts of companies to invest. They even invited the public to travel.

The compound beyond the sign, however, does not look inviting. Fences are only posts and wires, which is probably why they're still standing, and a gatehouse boasts two automated sentries. The lenses have frosted over, making for a dozen or so blind eyes in each suspended orb. Neither sentry rotates as I approach. Neither tracks my movement. The audio valve dangles from one. Both have been stripped of their guns, the support scaffold drooping impotently from each. Beyond them, several large mounds in the ash tell of where trucks are parked, and beyond these is a single building. They called it The Roundhouse, according to another Starline sign. From the middle of this emerges the cable. Except it's no more a cable than the snow around me is really snow. It's just the word we use. I'm so close I have to lean back to look up. Another L-flow fires, a line of light travelling up, up, up. The ring flashes its way into cloud and beyond, more to illuminate what it is than to indicate its operational power.

It's an elevator shaft, with a very long way between floors.

"Two-Twelve is cursed," Connor told us.

We were celebrating his arrival with slabs; they didn't look much, but meat was meat, processed or not. Mostly mother

and I stuck with the synths, but this occasion warranted something a little more grand. I tore my block into irregular chunks, making it seem more like the real thing, and was amused to see Connor do the same. Mother cut angles from hers and ate without any outward sign of the pleasure, though we could all hear each other's belly-rumbles of gratitude.

"What happened?" mother asked.

Connor spoke with his mouth full. "Is this beef?" His groans of delight were comical.

"Mostly," I said, ginning around my own forkful, "and not the best bits of the cow."

"I don't care." He shovelled in another piece.

"What happened?" mother asked again.

He looked at her. "Lots of things," he said. "Synth-mould, power failure, a couple of cases of cabin fever; the usual stuff you don't want to happen, only we got a lot of it all at once. A leak, too. Old reactors. They sealed off the worst of it pretty quick."

Remembering his rad-guard, I hoped so.

"What else?"

Connor ignored her while he devoured the last of his meal. It only took a few moments. His answer, though, was merely to repeat her question.

"Yes," she explained, "what else? Something made you leave."

"It was getting scary. Political. You seen politics work on a small scale? I got out before I had to take a side and hurt someone on the other one."

Mother simply grunted. We had our own politics, but since Alpha-Alpha the worst that ever happened between mother and me was a few days of silent treatment.

Settling back into his chair, Connor tried to strike up a friendly conversation with mother. "What did you do before?"

She pushed a final chunk of slab around, wiping up juice. "Before what?"

They both understood at the same time and were embarrassed; Connor because he'd realised mother wasn't that old, and mother because she'd forgotten she looked like she was.

"Who's running Two-Twelve?" she asked, recovering quickly if not gracefully. Her tone was aggressive.

"Look, I didn't mean –"

"I was born mid-winter, just like you."

He accepted that with a nod.

"Well, what are your skills?" I said to fill the new silence.

"Tech, production, medical? Me, I'm a tech-mech but –"

Connor waved it away and sucked at his drink foil. "I'm not staying."

There are footprints heading to the docking platform. Nothing more than slight indentations, but sheltered by the building they still haven't filled completely and the lights of my outgear pick them out easily. It's proof I no longer need that Connor found this place, though it seems his visit was more recent than he let on.

This close, the L-flow flash is dazzling. I follow it up, leaning back to watch. I won't see the next. By the time the next pulse fires I'll be chambered in and going up ahead of it.

I pat the pills again.

I wonder what the planet will look like from above. Will I see anything through the cloud? How much is left? Will I see –

There's movement, and an accompanying whir as one of the platform cams tracks my approach. I stop. I know it's automated, recording my slow steps for no one to ever see, but I can't help but wave. "Hello up there!" The outgear hates me for it, telling me its psst with each word, but I don't care. I'd sing if I had the energy.

One of the docking doors has been smashed so there's no need to open them. I step through the remaining frame into a large landing station.

"All aboard."

Psst.

The climber is bigger than I imagined and I realise the truck shape mounds out in the snow might not be trucks after all. I remember the adverts showing sleek tubes and bright colours. These are more like freight containers, but a little more rounded at the edges. For some reason I'd thought there'd be windows. Silly.

The laser mount looks intact. But then I'm only a grade three mech, I don't really know what I'm looking at. It'll either send me up or not. Hopefully it won't burn a hole through me or boil my insides.

The terminal switches on alright. Fast, actually. I set the deployment speed to Connor's instructions. It's nothing but a long line of numbers, but important apparently. It takes a while to process, the scrolling wait-bar aptly vertical.

I go to the climber.

The door opens on my approach, sliding without sound. It bumps quietly closed behind me.

PROCEED? prompts a touch screen inside. I touch the YES panel, fingers fat in my gloves, and there's a series of horn blasts I'm unprepared for. They startle me. The screen shows a radiation symbol and a bar beneath scrolls down to empty. I'm given the all clear.

It takes almost ten minutes to build the courage to remove the outgear. The chamber may seem sealed and reassuringly bright inside, but I still remember the smashed door *outside*. And I've never been anywhere beyond Two-Nine without full kit, however briefly. But then why come all this way to get scared now?

I pull the neck brace pipes, remove the helmet.

The first breath I take is achingly fresh, though I know it's as processed as anything else I've had in my lungs these last few years. I close my eyes with the inhalation, dropping the helmet to the floor without ceremony, relishing its absence.

PROCEED? the panel prompts again. This time I pull off my gloves and feel the coolness of the screen when I press YES. Next I feel for the pills.

Still there. I wait for the hum of machinery before taking them.

"Going up."

"Enter these numbers. You'll still get some lean, but this minimises it."

I looked at the paper. It was crumpled to a faded mass of



creases held together only by the ink on them. The numbers were legible though.

"Lean?"

"Coriolis effect," he said. As if it explained everything. I never thought to ask how he knew all about it. Mother would have.

"I don't need anything else? No coordinates or anything?"

Connor laughed. "No, there's only up. Thirty five thousand kilometres or so of it. You scared of heights?"

I laughed back.

"Can't blame you for leaving," he said.

"Hey, look, mother can be cold but –"

Connor held up his hand and shook his head, friendly. "I understand. Really."

"She has Millonna's," I explained.

"Shit."

"Yeah."

We gave that the moment it deserved.

"You'll need to look for something called Climatise," Connor said eventually. "They're pills for the journey. Don't ask me what they do, I just know you need them. They look like this."

He showed me a handful of pills. They were pale as beans and almost the same size. I wouldn't be dry-swallowing them.

"No pills, no trip?"

"No pills, no trip."

He waited for me to ask. So I'd think it was my idea.

"Can I just trade you something for those ones? You said you weren't going up anyway."

He probably smiled then, though it may have been a sad one I suppose; he was careful to have his back to me. "How much of that meat you got?"

When I was a boy, before the winter, my dad took me

out fishing. Only once. We went out onto the lake and I hooked a big one but I couldn't kill it. I got it from the water, netted it, had it in the boat, but after watching it flop around, drowning in the air, I let it go. I'd had so much encouragement from dad reeling it in that I felt like I'd disappointed him, though he said otherwise. So I insisted we stay out till I caught it again. We stayed out even when the wind came in, rocking the boat and making the water choppy. I was sick. Very sick. He didn't take me out again.

My trip up the starline is like that. It's not the climber, or the lean Connor told me about. It's the pills. I feel queasy, sea-sick. The only difference is I'm not throwing up. I'd feel worse without them, apparently.

I sit slumped in the corner, outgear still on save for the helmet and gloves. I breathe processed oxy and it tastes fresher than suit air, but still I feel nauseous. After the initial launch it doesn't feel like I'm moving at all. I could be sitting in the dock-station still for all I know.

Across from me is the pute, its console a scrolling line of numbers as if compensating for the upward motion I can't feel. I wonder if I can use it to signal mother, tell her where I am, but my limbs are heavy and my movements sluggish. I feel pressed into the corner I sit in. I don't think this unit was designed for passengers; there are holding panels for cargo and only one chair.

When the screen blinks and the numbers are replaced by a

curious face I wonder if I've fallen asleep. It's only there for a moment. Maybe the pills are making me hallucinate. Then the face is gone and the numbers are slowing down.

"He's taken our synth."

"We can make more." I was already working on it.

"What about slabs, can we make more of those?"

That was supposed to surprise me, shock me.

"I gave them to him."

"You gave them to him? Why? If he wants to traipse around out there that's his choice, but he can do it with synth, why give him our meat?"

She was furious.

"It was a trade. For those." I pointed to the Climatise

Up until then she had been holding herself in the doorway, literally clutching the frame as if coming all the way in to the lab would lead to something she still had sense enough to avoid. But at the sight of those pathetic pills, three tablets in exchange for actual food, she came striding in. She scooped them up with barely a glance only to throw them at me with a yell. I ducked, more from the sudden violence of the act than from any fear of being struck.

"You gave him all of this year's meat for those?" she screamed.

"No," I said, ashamed of the whine in my voice, "I gave him four slabs."

She rubbed her hands over her face and took a series of deep breaths to calm herself. "Four," she said. It was more to herself.

"Four."

She looked at me, the anger gone, but what I saw instead was worse.

"He took it all," she said. "Everything that wasn't in freeze."

I couldn't believe it. I left the scope I was at and ran to the kitchen only to find she was right.

"At least he didn't know about the outgear," she said softly from behind me. "At least you were sensible enough about that."

I knew from her tone she didn't simply trust that to be the case. She'd checked.

"I'll get on the console."

"No point," she said. "He won't answer. He sure as hell won't come back."

I nodded, already knowing what I was going to do. First I had to find the pills.

There's a hiss from somewhere, a systems noise that

fills the chamber, and the room I'm in shudders. It pumps up and down, there's another hiss, and then nothing.

The numbers on the monitor have stopped and the cursor blinks under the last three entries of a much diminished line of data. I'm getting up to read the screen when the doors hush open. I lurch for my helmet and pull it on, breathing frantically before the outgear can even dispense any air. Then the gloves, jamming two fingers into one opening in my haste. The rush of oxy cools my sweating face and I'm breathing pipe-pumped air again. I go to the open doors hesitantly, keeping a lot of floor space between me and the opening.

A tiny room waits beyond, painfully bright in its florescent light and polished white cleanliness. There's glare on the screen of my mask so I raise a hand to block it. There's nothing to see

but another door.

The monitor inside the capsule shows a countdown from 3000 to 2000 to 1000 but I've no idea what the measurements are. Under that: GSO, OK?. I press the OK key and everything blinks away to nothing. Even the lights power down. There's plenty coming from the room outside though.

Well, I didn't come all this way for nothing.

I take bold strides to the door but the bravado is undone when there's a gush of gas from various vents and I jump. Long plumes of chem envelop me and I fan my hands around to funnel a clear area, creating a whirling tunnel between me and the door. A light I hadn't seen blinks to green and the door opens. I can't see anything but darkness out there, but it's where I go.

"Hello?"

My voice carries no further than my mask, of course.

Tendrils of the chem fog follow me out into a large storage area and disperse. Somewhere above me a light flickers, flickers, and is on. Then another. Another.

The room is so large I'm giddy. I put a hand on the door frame to steady myself. Just a room, but it's been years since I've seen anything so vast. When I was young I worked in a warehouse loading bay; a dozen of them would fit into what I was seeing, which also looked to be a loading bay of sorts. The ceiling was far above me. Light bulbs would need to be changed by forklift or body-loader, they were so distant. I've lived in a warren of corridors and labs for almost all my years since winter, and in all of them I could touch the roof above me. I find myself wondering about birds, of all things.

Wahk! Wahk-wahk-wahk!

I stagger back in panicked retreat from what I see, thinking it has to be the pills. If it's not the Climatise, then coming towards me from behind a pallet of plac-wrapped boxes is a waddling group of geese. A gaggle, I realise, a gaggle of geese, and I wonder if I'm still sane.

Wahk!

There's about a dozen of them leaning left, right, left in a hurrying wobble to get to me. Their webbed feet are as orange as my outgear, their bodies a sleek-feathered white, plump and heavy. Beaks open only to honk their greetings yet I'm afraid, or rather I'm shocked, surprised, and I stumble away. A door panel glows its outline on the wall that steadies me and I slap my palm against it, not caring where it leads, just wanting to get away.

The door rushes up and open and I step back over the threshold, my eyes on the approaching birds. Some have strayed away from the main group but enough remain in pursuit that I call the door back down quickly and then they're gone.

My ridiculous sigh of relief comes out of me ragged. My outgear bleeps urgently in time with my speeding heart rate. It slows as I back away from the door and I turn to see where I am.

I take such a breath that I feel light headed with all the oxy. "Oh," is all I can manage. I exhale with a whoosh and it clouds the vis, but not so much that I can't see. Maybe it's not the oxy making me light headed. Maybe it's the view.

I step up to the window and press my hands to it. I am in awe, there are so many. So many of them. I'd forgotten.

"Stars."

And just like that, I'm weeping.



"You can't go out there."

It was a pointless thing for her to say. I was in the hatch, out-gear on, ready. I'd commed her down only to say goodbye. All I had to do was flip a switch and the outside would come inside. There was nothing she could do to stop that.

She came into the hatch with me.

"What are you doing?" I cried, snatching my hand back from the console as if burned; I'd been centimetres away from flooding her with rads.

Alright, there *was* something she could do to stop me. Temporarily. She knew I wouldn't open the doors with her unsuited in the hatch.

"He's lying," she said. "I checked Two-Twelve."

"Comms don't reach that far."

"I checked the manifest. Half the people he mentioned aren't on it."

"What about the other half?"

She sighed. "There's nothing out there."

"I need to see."

"Why? You never did before."

I couldn't explain. I couldn't put into words how our visitor had given me more than just pills. She was born mid-winter. She didn't know what hope was.

"Please," she tried, and that nearly worked. Not so much the rarity of the word from her, but the wetness of her eyes and the catch in her voice as she said it.

I took off my helmet so it wouldn't be muffled this time: "I need to see."

We stood facing each other, waiting for someone to relent.

"I have Millonna's," she said. It was cruel of her.

"I know. Maybe there's a better lab, one with the compounds you need."

She shook her head, and for the first time I saw her cry. Nothing as dramatic as sobbing, that would be too much of a weakness for mother. No; quiet tears were the only ones that would ever wet her cheeks.

I stepped nearer, arms open to embrace her, hold her close, but she hurried away and closed the door behind her.

"Go," she said. She was on the console, speaking into my out-gear. I heard her voice tinny and distant from the helmet in my hands. I put it on and immediately the hatch opened. Mother was watching.

"I'm coming back," I said.

"I don't want you to."

I walked out into the snow, wondering if either statement was true.

It's a long time before I can take myself away from the window. Outside, the darkness of a sky I've not seen in years dazzles me with points of light I thought would only ever twinkle again in nursery rhymes. I have to remind myself that they're only suns, and I marvel that ours has been sending its own light out yet can't penetrate the ash-clouds of our new sky.

I'm in a corridor that stretches a long way in front and behind and several doors line its walls. Nearby, though, is a touch-map and I go to it eagerly, curious as to what I might find. I want to check for food, lab tech, medical supplies.

Food is in a kitchen five doors down. The inventory reads like something from fiction. There's food here, actual real food. Even though I'd seen the geese, and even though it's partly what I've come for, it's a surprise. A feast scrolls down before my eyes and I salivate just reading it. I make for the kitchen at something close to a run, pulling off my helmet at the assurance of the screen that there's nothing to fear up here.

The door opens onto a white space of cupboards and drawers and fridges. There's an aroma of roast goose and half a carcass steams on the table surrounded by bowls of cooked vegetables. *Vegetables*. There's a man here, eating. He's so close I hear the crisp of skin as he bites into a drumstick wonderfully golden and real.

"Hi," he says, chewing with a nonchalance I find unbearable. "Want some?"

There's too much to say, and too much food to eat instead, so I sit and gorge myself with complete abandon.

The man's name is Hugo and he wants my bone marrow. He tells me this before anything else.

"My bone marrow?"

He's finished eating but I'm still picking at platefuls of fruit. There are apples, golden delicious, and chunks of pineapple that glisten like uncut gemstones.

"You'll be sick," he says.

"I know." There's juice on my chin. "I don't care."

I sink my teeth into a shining curve of melon. My smile feels the same size.

"I have a degenerative bone disease," he tells me. "A cancer of the haematologic progenitor cells. A leukaemia. If we're compatible I can take stem cells from you and infuse them so they'll produce healthy cells in me. Once I've killed off my diseased ones."

"How?"

"Radiation therapy."

His answer is not without irony. Up here, radiation's part of his cure.

"I mean how will you transplant the bone marrow?"

"It's easy, you won't even need stitches. A minimally invasive procedure. A guy with grade one meds showed me how."

I think of mother and lose my appetite.

"Eat up," he says. "You need it."

I know how gaunt I look. I grew my beard only because I hated seeing a skeleton look back at me in mirrors. Synth may have all the nutrients, but it doesn't do much else. Hugo, on the other hand, is a giant of a man, large in a way that speaks of too much food and too little exercise.

"Is it just you up here?" I take another leg of meat.

"Just me." He rests his hands on a belly I envy.

"What happened to everyone else?"

"Took the shuttle. Went to one of the other towers, most likely. This one's pretty bare."

Thinking of all the food I'd seen listed in the inventory I have to disagree, but then he hasn't been on the surface since winter came. When the sky was filling with ash, he was up here stuffing his face and looking at the stars.

"Why didn't you go with them?"

He shrugs. "I waited for my doctor to come."

"And?"

"Yeah, he came."

"So where is he now?"

Hugo stands, towering over me, and takes my plate. "He's gone," he says, clearing the table.

The single bunk is no different to the one back in

Two-Nine, but the amount of space around it makes it more comfortable somehow. That, and the plate of cold cuts on the bedside table. And yet I cannot sleep. Partly it's the window opposite that shows me stars, stars, stars, but mostly it's thinking of mother. Laura. I wonder if she's sucking a tube of synth for her evening meal, or maybe treating herself to one of the rationed slabs in my absence. Most likely she's bent over one of the scopes in the lab, splash-mac on, trying to create a new treatment for Millonna's. In a fully equipped lab it would be no problem. In Two-Nine...

I sigh, swing my legs out of bed, and put my bare feet down to a cool floor. There's a light smock hanging on the door so I put it on. It fits like an old hospital gown. In the days before winter I would walk if I couldn't sleep. I used to do the same in Two-Nine, treading myself tired on the machine, but here I can do it the old fashioned way.

The quiet is something I'm very used to. The distance I can walk in a straight line is not. It's pleasant. I could go for a decent jog if I wanted. A whole bunch of people could.

I find myself heading to the comms room. Broken, Hugo had said. Technological fault beyond repair that occurred shortly after his doctor arrived. Well, it couldn't hurt to look.

Broken is right but 'technological fault' is euphemistic; the entire console has been attacked. Panels have been bent out of shape, screens are cracked jagged, dials and switches knocked from sockets. A heavy wrench lays nearby, but it hasn't been used for repairs. With the comms console spewing cables like bloodless innards from open wounds, it looks more like a discarded murder weapon.

I pick it up.

I head back to my room with the wrench in hand. Had one of the others sabotaged his communications Hugo would have had no reason not to tell me. He must have destroyed it himself, cutting off any means of contact with the outside world. I find myself thinking about the other people, the ones that took the shuttle.

Hugo is standing outside my door. The whispered hush of the one I open startles him and he draws back, but I can tell he was reaching for the operating panel rather than the intercom. He was going to let himself in.

"What do you want?"

I'm careful to have the wrench behind my back, casual, the length of it hidden behind my leg.

"There you are. Where have you been?" Hugo smiles, but he's more concerned than he wants me to think.

"For a walk. I couldn't sleep."

"Me neither. I thought I'd come and see if I could take a sample. For tomorrow." He holds the syringe out for me to see though I'd already noticed it cupped in his hand.

We stare at each other for a moment.

"What, exactly, is wrong with you?"

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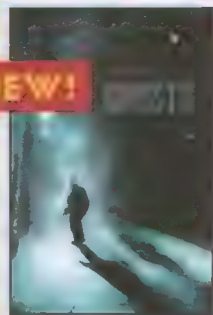
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There were three of them then, and they were each eight years old: three young boys more at home with games and fantasy than hard reality. The day that fused these two states – when a nightmare became real life – changed them forever. But all that happened much earlier, in the Autumn of 1980. This is what came later, long after the fact. Rather than the details of the incident itself, this story constitutes the *results* of the harm. Cover art by **Ben Baldwin**

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INTERZONE #233



It's a deliberately open question.

"A cancer of the haematologic progenitor cells. I've already said this, haven't I?"

"Mm."

"If we're compatible –" again, he shows the syringe – then I can take stem cells."

"I don't think so."

He frowns.

"Not yet, anyway," I add. I'm hoping for a reassuring tone but can't tell if I'm managing it. "There's someone back where I came from. She's medically trained. I can get her and she can help."

"No."

"It's not far. I'll be back real quick."

"No. There are too many dangers. The radiation could damage your cells, or you may decide not to return."

"I will come back. I will help you. We'll do this, but we'll do it with her."

Hugo steps forward. "There are drugs that stimulate the release of stem cells from bone marrow into your circulating blood," he tries, raising the syringe, this time not only to show me, "I just need to insert an IV..."

I'm backing away, very aware again of how big this man is, how well fed, how much larger he is than me. "I've seen the comms room."

He stops.

"I don't trust you, not now. Not enough for you to stick needles in me. Not enough to let you give me drugs."

"You've taken them already. The pills you took."

I hadn't told him about –

"My brother gave them to you. Connor. Nobody finds this place without his help."

He takes full advantage of my confusion and attacks.

He's bigger, but I'm quicker. His lunge is a desperate one I'm able to sidestep easily. I bring the wrench around and up but I can't bring it down on him. He turns and sees the threat, lunges at me again. This time he catches me across the midsection, propelling me back against the wall. It knocks the wind from me and it knocks the wrench from my hands. It clatters somewhere on the floor. I bring my bony elbows down on his back but all I get from that is a grunt I'm not even sure is his. Then there's a sharp sting in my hip and I realise he's stuck me with the syringe. I twist in a panic, thrashing in his grip. I catch him in the cheek with my elbow this time and feel something crack there. He howls in pain and I struggle free. My foot connects with the wrench before I can stoop to pick it up and it spins away down the corridor. Fumbling for it, I see the syringe. He's dropped it in the struggle. I have time only to scoop it up, noticing the needle is broken, and then he's barrelling into me again. The momentum forces me a few hurried steps back and my legs tangle. I fall, bringing him down on top of me. His hands are on my throat.

"You're just like all the others," he says. "But I'll have it. Alive or dead, I'll have it."

I can barely breathe. I bring the needle down to the back of his neck, forcing the plunger down with the blow, hoping to

surprise him enough that he lets go. He does more than that. He collapses off of me and lays on the floor, mouth opening and closing like a fish. I'm gasping the sounds he doesn't make as I struggle to breathe again alongside him. By the time I'm doing it normally he's unconscious. There must have been something in the syringe. He was going to give me something before taking something, it seems.

The first thing I do is pick the broken needle from the flesh of my hip, thankful he didn't dose me.

The second thing I do is take care of Hugo.

I'm in the comms rooms when Hugo regains consciousness. I watch him on screen. He blinks a lot. His voice is slow.

"What are you doing?" he asks the room. He knows I can see; he'd watched me the same way once, briefly.

The answer should be obvious. I've put outgear in the elevator capsule with him, a batt-pack with backup far more efficient than my prehistoric kinetic generator, and a bag of food and drink as well. Real food. I've also left him directions to Alph-Alpha. They might help him.

He doesn't like being ignored. He shouts the question again, bellowing it, his strength returning. I try to focus on what I'm doing.

His tone is more resigned when he asks, "What have you done?"

I glance up from the wires I'm twisting together. I can see from the readout onscreen he's tried to cancel his descent.

"You can't come back up," I tell him, reaching for a solder-strip. I lower it carefully to hold the wires in place and it melds them to the comboard. "Not yet, anyway."

"When?"

"When I've fixed the comms you destroyed, the ones that go out-station. Then I'll call out to people, including you."

But starting with mother.

"And Connor?"

I look at the screen. Hugo is looking at me as he speaks.

"He's a good man." He's nodding, desperate for me to agree. "A good doctor. What happened to the others wasn't his fault, it was mine. I made him come, and then I made him help clean up my mess."

I don't know for sure what he's talking about, but I have a good enough idea. It doesn't involve people taking a shuttle.

"Will you call him back? Please?"

Remembering the outgear Connor had left at Two-Nine, I doubt he'll come. He may love his brother enough to help him, even now, but the lack of rad-guard he wears suggests he doesn't love himself much for doing it. Mother thought I hadn't told him about our outgear, that he left it because he didn't know, but the truth is he knew what we had and where we kept it; I'm a tech-mech, I get excited about things like that. I showed him when I gave him the grand tour. He simply chose not to take it.

Still, I tell Hugo yes, I'll call Connor. I'll call everyone I can. There's plenty of room up here, plenty of everything. I just need to fix a few things then people will come.

There's no limit to what we can do. ♦





CROSTOWN TRAFFIC

TIM LEES

Iworked for Reuben then, a stubby little tub of a guy from some place unpronounceable; he showed me where it was one time, pointing in the sky up over Houston Street. “Oh yeah,” I said, “I see.” “Got damn good eyesight then,” he told me. Reuben wore a yarmulke, though he obviously wasn’t Jewish. “I have a small blowhole in the top of my head like a porpoise,” he said. “This keeps it warm.” I said, “That’s really funny, Rube.” He didn’t smile, just gave me this peculiar sideways look like I was some sort of an idiot. Well, maybe he was serious. You never knew with these guys. In fact, that’s just about the only thing I ever learned in all my time there: that you never, never knew.

He’d called me up to meet him in a curry house on Tenth and Second. He’d been there for a while I guess because the whole table was littered with the scraps of this humongous meal. My gut just started rumbling at the sight of it. I don’t know how long since I’d eaten last. Too long, anyway.

I sat. He stood.

“Right, kiddo. Duty calls.”

“But, but – ”

“I’m done here.”

“I’m not.” There were bhajis, rice, pakoras, trays of sauce with meat still wallowing... Reuben jerked a thumb toward the door. I snatched up what I could – chicken, chapatti, onion – and stuffed them in my mouth.

“It’s an appointment, kiddo. Wanna make ‘em wait?” He was out there on the street. “No you do not.”

Reuben had a weird, bow-legged walk, kind of funny, though he wasn’t what you’d call a funny guy. I trotted after, licking my fingers, stray food dribbling down my chin. “Rube,” I called, “what’s happening? What we doing, man?”

He wouldn’t answer me. It used to tick me off, that mystery bit, the need-to-know stuff he was running. I asked him once, “Don’t trust me then?” only he wouldn’t answer that one, either.

We walked a couple blocks, stopped at a house, Reuben pushed the buzzer. Ordinary house, newer than most of the East Village; still not new. Glass bricks in the wall. Probably a statement, years ago, I thought, something about openness or honesty or something, though now it just looked sort of tacky and old-fashioned. Reuben tapped his feet. He fidgeted.

He pressed again and held it for a long time. The intercom coughed briefly. Then a voice said, "Huh?"

"Reuben."

"Who else?"

"Errand boy."

The door-lock clicked. He nodded me inside.

"I've got a name," I said.

"Not here, you don't."

The entrance hall was cramped. The light was green and muddy. A stack of mail lay on a plastic table, and I flicked through, hoping there'd be something I could use. Reuben slapped my hand and pointed me upstairs.

There was a guy there, waiting in the upstairs hall. He wore a blue silk Chinese jacket, from which his neck rose straight up from the collar to the mouth, no chin at all. I thought it was a terrible affliction, to be born like that. I nodded to him, sort of sympathetically. He eyed us up and down, then pushed open the inner door. We followed him inside.

It was a dentist's room. Or it looked like one. A half a dozen plastic chairs lay scattered round, part of the same set as the table downstairs. There were pictures on the walls, those cheesy things that dentists always have – sunsets and beaches and the Grand Canyon, all that. But the surgery wasn't screened off, the way it should have been. At the far end was a big black leather chair with some guy sprawled in it and half a dozen others leaning over, trying to hold him down. He was making this disgusting sound. Really bad. I thought it was the plumbing first of all, only it wasn't, it was this guy, snorting and gargling and making just the worst kind of a rumpus. It got hard to listen to. One of the nurses cursed at him for wriggling, which I thought was pretty unprofessional, as well. A tall guy dressed in white was trying to operate. He kept on calling out for instruments, and a girl, also very tall, would pass them to him from a plastic tray, pale face stiff with concentration. Something in the whole scene was just wrong. Even the tools were wrong. They didn't look like any kind of dentist's tools I'd ever seen, and the names that he was calling out were ludicrous, for God's sake: *fulnic* and *thrumble* and *gevelniter*, Christ knows what else.

And shouldn't this guy be on novocaine? I mean, what tooth-ache's bad enough you'd let them operate without a shot?

I noticed something else, though, pretty soon: that they weren't working on his mouth.

His head was down, his knees were up. I moved around to get a look and...well, they were sticking something up his nose. *Gross*, I thought. *Just double gross*. The man in white was doing it. Sticking it up and twisting it around.

I turned away, pulled out my cigarettes, but Reuben shook his head to tell me no.

I looked back at the chair.

I can't say much about the guy there. His face was just so twisted up even his mother wouldn't recognise him. But his clothes were good. I mean, he had to have insurance. He was angled back so mostly I was looking at his shoes, and they were smart, black, polished shoes. I notice stuff like that. I'd have liked his shoes. I watched them kick and twitch and a couple of

the guys had hold around his ankles trying to keep them still. The rest of him, I didn't much like looking at. But I couldn't help myself. I looked, I turned away, looked back. It wasn't good. They'd pulled one of his nostrils out like – well, you just would not believe how far that skin could stretch. You could have worn it for a bracelet if you'd wanted. And the fellow in the white coat kept jamming all these crazy-looking implements up there and wrenching them around, and the chair-guy's breath came harder till it sounded like a steam whistle. It got kind of intense at that point, I can tell you. My fists balled up, my teeth clenched down. Then suddenly the guy in white went, "Ah!" and stepped back.

I swear the blood shot six feet. Right over chair-guy's pants, his shiny shoes, and up the guy's white coat, as well. Then stopped. Like that. They all let go of the guy in the chair. Somebody laughed. They laughed! Everyone was grinning! The guy in white held up his hand. He had a set of callipers, and there was something twisting on the end, just wriggling back and forth.

"Jesus." I had to have that cigarette. "Can I wait outside?"

Reuben shrugged. "Don't go roaming off, hear?"

Last I saw they put the wriggling thing into a glass tube, and everyone looked set to have a party. Except the guy sat in the chair, that is.

You'd think that he'd just be glad it was all over. But he wasn't. He sat there, sobbing, crying his poor heart out. Not from the pain, I don't think.

This was deeper, more despair, more like he'd just lost something, something he'd never have again...

And twenty seconds later, I was back out on the street, snatching at my pack.

Cigarettes'll kill you, so the Surgeon General says, and I expect he's right. But there are times, I swear, I really could care less.



"Right, kid. We're good to go."

Reuben was grinning. I'd hit my third smoke, gearing for my fourth. What he showed me was a gift-wrapped box, long as my hand, all done up like Macy's Christmas special: satin paper, deep maroon, a bright pink ribbon wrapped around. They'd even put a rosette on the top.

"You know Cloisters? Tryon Park?" He pushed the package at me. "Here kid. Take it."

"Is this...?"

"This," he told me, good mood gone in seconds, "is your job."

I took it. Didn't like it. It was pretty obvious: the box was just about the size to hold the glass tube with the wriggly thing inside. I held it away from me.

"Is it...you know. Organic?"

"What do you care?"

There was an edge there in his voice now. I said, "Nothing. But, well – Christ sake, Rube. I run this stuff all over town for you, I think that sometimes I'm entitled, like, I got a right –"

He held his hand out.

"Give."

"What?" I pulled the package to my chest.

"Give back. I'll find another courier."

"No – look." I put my head down, humble now. "I got a job, I'll do it. Just, I, you know, I just..."

He wasn't backing down. I said, very quietly, "Sorry, Rube. I was, I was really out of line there. Sorry."

"Still wanna know?"

"No. No. Guess not."

"Think the mailman knows what's in the mail? Think so? Mailman's *delivery*, see? He's *system*. That's what you are, too."

He took out his clip, peeled off some bills.

"Car fare," he said, and stuffed them in my pocket. He looked at me. There was something odd about his eyes. Not the shape of them, not the colour, exactly; but the iris had grown suddenly opaque, a solid disc of steely grey. I'd always thought his eyes were blue. Not now.

"More questions?"

I shook my head.

"Objections?"

"No."

"OK."

He left me there. I looked down at the little box, done up like Xmas. Or like Valentine's, I thought. Then I put it in my pocket, buttoned up and headed off uptown.

Car fare. I checked it over. Good money. But then, I wasn't taking any cab.

This was my secret. I didn't do it every time. But Reuben gave me car fare, and me, I took the subway. Or I walked. Some days you got there quicker anyhow. So I wasn't tricking him, not really, not how I saw it. Just using my initiative. So everybody wins.

And now, still smarting from that dressing-down, there was just no way I was going to take a cab. No way in the world.

Fuck Reuben. This was one for me.

There was a cop, a black guy standing at the subway entrance, blocking off the steps. I moved to pass. He said something like, "Fire station," which didn't make an ounce of sense, so I made another pass. "*Fire station*." "Oh, man, come on," I said. "It's urgent, yeah?" He leaned up close. Peppermint breath-fresh. And then very, very slowly, like he was talking to an idiot, he told me, "In. Fes. Station. Got it now?"

"Infes...?" I processed this. "OK. I'll try Union."

"Whole grid's down. En-tire thing."

"Till when?"

He gave a shrug. "Till they catch whatever bug they're chasin' down there. Dunno." He nodded to the roadway. "Hear they got a thing here called a taxi cab you might wanna try."

"Screw that."

"A thought."

"Screw that!"

I stalked away. I put my hand into my pocket, thumbed through Reuben's cash. It crossed my mind that maybe this was not the one to fuck him on. But that was all it did: cross, then drift away some place. The money was as good as spent. I'd planned it out. Initiative, I told myself. Initiative...

There's a bus uptown. I think it's the 3. No-one in a hurry ever takes it. But I told myself, OK then. That's my op-

tion, that's my gig.

I took the bus.

I wasn't thinking about much. Peering out the window, checking out the girls, great sport midtown. Till something else intruded on my day.

There was a party of Pafiddians sitting up front. Nothing so unusual in that. Pafs get everywhere, and mostly I ignore them, which is smart. They're silly and they waste your time and usually they've got some stupid scheme they want you to buy into, which is always bullshit from the start. But these guys...

I didn't notice them at all till they stopped chattering. They'd kept it up since I got on, this constant, faintly annoying buzz, like a fly loose in the room. And then they stopped. Together, just like somebody pulled a switch. And one of them – Yankees cap, coat done up all wrong, typical Paf, in fact – he sort of screwed his head around, very deliberately, and stared at me.

I tried not to respond. Pafs don't embarrass, don't get shy. But you can sometimes freeze them out, you make it plain you won't be interested, no matter what they're trying to sell.

I wouldn't even look at him at first. Not straight. Just kept him in the corner of my eye, that's all.

And then the others, all five, all swivelled round the same, and glared at me.

I glanced behind. No-one behind. So it was me they'd got the hots for, no mistake. And what the hell was this about? Any moment, I thought, one of them'll stand up, come across and try to sell me Pluto, or the asteroid belt, or some such crap. They do it all the time; they're the scam-kings of the universe, or like to think they are. Truth is, they're small time. And it's not that I don't like them; just that there's not much there to like.

I changed my tactics, spent a minute staring right back, wrinkling up my lip. That didn't work. So I went back to the window, watched the eye-candy.

There was a smart young girl wearing a black suit, wafer-thin, a model, I suppose. Latina girl with rolling hips. Blonde, blonde, redhead... But even then, over and over, I found myself taking a quick glance at the Pafs.

One of them twitched. It was a weird move, small but terribly intense, as if he just wanted to leap at me, and the guy beside him clamped a hand over his arm and held him back.

Now I was worried.

I know Pafs, I know exactly what they do. They'll sidle up to you, they'll get you in a conversation, ask you for a dollar which they clearly do not need, and when you turn them down, they'll smile, and ask for something else, and presently, go off and find another mark. But these guys...like wolves at lambing time, that's how they were. Like it was lunch, and I was Menu Item Number One. I wasn't scared – I'm not afraid of Pafs – but it was all unnerving. It was wrong. We crawled into the 90s, stop-starting up Museum Row, and I thought, well, the hell with it. I let the bus come to a halt, waited for people to get off. I faked a yawn, leaned back; and then, just as the last guy hit the sidewalk, I was with him. Two, three seconds, from a sitting start. The door clicked shut, the bus drove off, the Pafs rushed to the rear window, pushing their faces at it, slobbering across the glass.



I offered them a one-digit salute.
Some things in life, a boy can live without.

The Park was good. I'd cut across, catch transport up the west side, might be the A or C was running. But the Pafs had really bothered me. I didn't understand it, that's the thing. I'd never seen them act like that, never even heard of it. And OK, fine, so they were Pafs, which meant there's not a lot that I'd have put beyond them. But what bothered me, I think, was more the nagging little sense that somehow, in a way I couldn't yet work out, Reuben was involved. Like they'd been paid to spy on me or something. Now, this was nuts, I knew – no-one hires Pafs – and nuttier the way it just kept circling round my head, but for the moment there was no way I could shake it off, no way at all.

Some guys were playing soccer on the lawns. One guy had these amazing telescopic legs – prosthetics, I suppose – and every time he'd wind them up and start to stride around the field his whole team would go crazy, clapping and hollering and whistling, then he'd score and they'd go even crazier. You'd think there'd be a rule against that kind of thing, but no. And personally, I've never seen the fun in soccer, though if they let you cheat like that, I guess there's probably a certain mind-set it appeals to. Pafs, just for a start.

So I went on. A guy fell in beside me. Very easy, very natural; I hardly even noticed him at first. In fact it was the dog that caught my eye, this elegant, high-stepping afghan hound; the light just seemed to ripple through its coat with every step. And from there, I looked up at the guy, and he was pretty special, too. Casual, but wealthy casual: Brookes Bros shirt, button down collar, smart, lightweight shoes. Off-duty lawyer, say, or CEO.

On-duty queer, more like.

"Great day," he said.

"Sure is." I smiled, not enough to be a come-on, just enough to keep him keen. It was habit, really. Still, the smell of money...it made my neck tingle. And he'd be good for something, I could bet – a cigarette, an ice cream, even a meal. All Reuben's money, and I still hadn't eaten yet! No wonder I was getting paranoid! Low blood sugar, fatigue, vitamin deficiency –

"Yeah," I said, "I love the Park like this."

"Me too."

We were strolling, still following the paths up and crosstown, which was fine by me. I said, "You live round here? Like, near the Park?"

Meaning: *how rich are you?*

"Pretty near," he said, and caught my eye, and smiled; which meant, as I read it, *no way I'm going to tell you yet.*

I looked around. Feigned a little mild distress. "Christ," I said. "Don't know what it is – sunny day like this, always makes me want a smoke. And I'm all out of smokes. Weird luck, huh?"

"I think you're hinting there."

I gave a 'might be' shrug.

The dog looked up at him, long snout sniffing at the air. He reached down, scratched its head. There was a moment's silence, the man and dog communing, just the two of them, all very sweet.



He said, "Well, we can get some smokes. Not in the Park, though. And I guess that I can help you out, you need a little help...?"

"Preciate it. Yeah. I'm short, y'know? Temporarily, but..."

I felt Reuben's money in my pocket.

"No problem. I can help you out there, like I say. And maybe...maybe we'll think of something you can do for me, you know? We do a trade? That's fair, I think? A trade?"

Now, I'd expected this. So I launched into my little speech, "Oh, wow, I'd love to, but I'm late for this appointment uptown, it's a job thing, you know, and I really gotta go, I'm really hoping this time...but I could meet you back here in a couple of hours, say? I'd really like that. If you could give me car fare, that would be a great help, and –"

He held his hands up, laughing at me.

"No, no, no. You got it wrong."

"OK." I made to turn my back, quickened my pace. He quickened too, to keep up.

"What's your name?"

"Pete." It was the first name came into my head.

"Well, Pete. You've read me quite wrong, I'm afraid. I daresay you're desirable, only that's not what interests me. Honestly. You've got an item on you. I'd be willing to pay well for it."

He had a warm, smooth voice, persuasive, like a really good insurance salesman.

"What? Like, you'd pay a million? Something like that?"

"Hardly. But – let's say, you won't be hungry for a while. Or thirsty, either." He paused, a little theatrical beat. "You *are* hungry, aren't you? I know you are. Felix can smell it."

His hand went down, nuzzled the dog behind the ear.

"You've got a dog named *Felix*?" I said.

"Sure."

"That's crazy."

"And we know what's in your pocket, too. We'd like to buy it. As I say, we'll give a fair price. More than fair, in fact."

"I eat when I feel like it," I said. "Don't feel like it right now."

The man and the dog looked at each other. Then the man said, "I can give you...oh, a hundred bucks. Right now. How's that?"

"You're offering a hundred," I said, "tells me it's worth a two."

I said it automatically, meantime thinking, *how the hell does he know what I'm carrying? What's going on here?* Then, a quarter second later, and just what am I carrying, in any case, that Reuben was so fucking coy about?

Man and dog exchanged another glance. The former pulled a billfold from his pocket, counted out ten twenties. There was plenty left.

"Double it, we'll talk," I said.

"Don't get above yourself."

"OK, OK. Deal." I stopped walking; they stopped walking. He held the money out, ready to join Reuben's car fare. This was turning out to be my lucky day.

"Two hundred," I said, "for what's in my pocket. Right?"

I smiled. He nodded. I took hold of the bills.

I handed him a pack of cigarettes.

"Well, look at that. I got some after all."

Now, I'd thought that I was fast. And pretty strong. And this guy didn't look like all that much. He'd got a belly for a start. But as I turned he grabbed my wrist. I twisted, but I couldn't shake him off.

"Hey!" I called out. "Hey! Hey!"

"Other pocket."

It was the man who spoke, but the dog that fixed me with its eyes, right on the pocket where I'd put the box. Staring like he'd burn a hole straight through the cloth.

Drooling, too. The spit was pooling on the ground.

"Alright, alright! Enough already! It's yours, OK? It's yours!"

I'd worked security a few months back. It lasted about five minutes, but I'd picked up some good tricks. One that came back to me now was this: the weakest part of anybody's grip's the thumb. So I reached my free hand for my pocket. Let him see it. Focus on it. And the wrist that he was holding... Suddenly I wrenched it sideways. I was free! We stood there for a moment, looking at each other, both sort of surprised, and then I took a step away. Another. And I turned, and ran.

Looking back, I saw the guy just standing there, still didn't know what hit him. But the dog – Jesus! The dog was heading for me like a cannonball! It was incredible. Didn't this animal know when to quit?

I could have just run harder. But I was out of breath already and that thing was fast, I doubt I would have gotten very far. So I stopped.

I had on heavy boots, no good for running anyway, but good for other stuff. I let the dog get close. It hurtled up, I stepped aside, raised my foot, and swung.

I caught it in the chest someplace. Went in again, and kicked, and kicked.

Poor mutt. It didn't look so lovely after that. There were people staring, horrified, but no-one tried to stop me. Mad dog! Crazy! It got its teeth into my pants and ripped so then I booted it one after the other, fast, until its legs gave out, it rolled onto its back, and then I gave it one more, right in the snout.

I moved back, breathing hard. I'd just been mugged by a dog! By a *dog*, for Christ sake! What the hell did that mean, anyway?

The creature glared at me from half-closed eyes, then curled its lip back, and a little bead of drool and blood ran out around its eyetooth, and it spoke to me in what I took to be a Jersey accent.

"Motherfucker," said the dog.

Uptown, west side. I put my hood up, walking quickly. Well, you wonder sometimes. Coincidence, or paranoia? Or is something going on that maybe, maybe you should know about? Like, even if you'd rather not?

What I kept on coming back to, all the time, was Reuben. Reuben was smart. Reuben was shrewd. So did he know? 'Cos even if I wasn't quite ripping him off, you might say I was misappropriating funds. Not for the first time, either. And if Reuben so much as suspected...

But would Reuben use *Pafiddians*? Of all people? Someone as smart as him? And furthermore: *they'd all been on the bus*

before me. They'd been sitting there when I got on. So how in hell did that work out?

Guy in the park, too, must have been pretty near to get to me so fast. And Reuben could not, he could *not* have known I'd take that route, get off that stop. Could not, because I couldn't, either. Unless – you heard things, sometimes. Skills, tricks, alien stuff. Precognition...?

Or was someone else after the box as well? Reuben's enemies, whoever they might be? Or Reuben's *friends*?

I thought back to that poor guy in the chair. That thing they'd pulled out of his nose, that giant booger thing. A living, squirming booger...

I felt the package, bumping on my hip each step I took. And it did not feel good.

I hadn't planned to walk this far, yet somehow, I just had. On my left, Morningside Park rose steep and threadbare in the summer heat: trees, rocks, grass...

...and dinosaurs...

I didn't spot them right away. Curled together in a knot of scales, they looked like boulders, like a pile of stones, till one craned up its big, blunt head, a long tongue flickering, tasting the air...

They weren't real dinosaurs, of course. I don't recall where

they were from. But I'd seen them on TV, or read about them, protesting for their rights to sunbathe in the park like anybody else. Big grey lizards, five or six of them, the sunshine making rainbows on their shiny hides. It was a news item because the locals had objected to the way they'd slink up to the kiddies' play park, eyeing the mites within like they were staring through the windows of the local deli.

Which was pretty much the way they looked at me now, too.

The first one eased itself erect. The head came round, its squinty eyes trying to match up sight and scent. They were a distance off; normally, I wouldn't much have worried. But today... A little something in my head just went, "Uh-oh."

The thing uncoiled. It stood, and shook itself. It was big – easily fifteen, twenty feet – a thick tail flapping slowly side to side, the head thrust forward; and as I watched a string of spit-
tle oozed out from the lower jaw, swung and trickled to the ground...

New York is full of cabs. But have you ever noticed, when you really, really need one, that there's never one around?

Especially in Harlem?

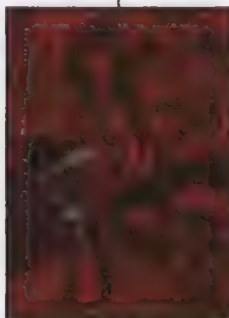
I didn't run. I was thinking of the Afghan hound. I figured they were probably like dogs: you ran, you'd trigger off a hunting reflex. You might as well just shout, "Attack!" But still, I quickened my pace. I quickened it a lot. Then risked a glance.

They were all up, on their feet, loping down the hill towards me, every single one. Still a fair way off, but they'd have gotten to me in a dozen leaps if they'd have wanted to.

And that's the moment when the taxi came in sight.

The only taxi, anywhere.

I didn't even bother trying to flag it down. I ran into the road, waving my arms and shrieking. Right away, the lizards saw their dinner getting ready to abscond. The nearest reared



like a prairie dog, if you can think about a prairie dog shaped like a miniature Godzilla. The cabbie swung out round me, but I thought, hell, if the choice was being lizard chow or going under someone's wheels, I'd take the latter, every time. At least it was civilized. I flung myself across the hood. The car swerved, squealed, stuttered to a halt. I didn't even hear the names the driver called me. They weren't in English anyhow. I got the door open and I was in that seat so fast he couldn't even blink.

"Just fucking drive!"

At which point, this big, reptilian monster head-butted the windshield, crazed it into pieces. A spray of lizard-spit convinced the cabbie I'd the right idea. He floored it. We caught the lizard sideways and the jolt went through the chassis and my head bumped on the roof. And we were gone. I looked back and that big grey monster lay there tipped onto its back, threshing in the middle of the road, clawing the air with big, grey talons. A truck was coming up behind and honking for it to get out the way.

The other lizards hadn't left the park. They looked a bit embarrassed, it seemed to me, shuffling round, switching their tails; you could almost hear them: "No, he's not with us, we don't know who he is..."

I whooped. I yelled. "You look at 'em!"

I punched the air. I clapped my driver on the back.

"Weren't we just great? Weren't we just fucking great?"

He turned into a sidestreet, pulled up at the kerb. He locked the doors.

"No," I said. "Not great. Magnificent! Mag-fucking-nificent!"

I grinned at him.

He wasn't grinning back.

All he said was, "Money."

I didn't get it. "Money? For what, money?"

The sense of triumph filled me; we were partners, comrades – brothers in arms! Then he was ranting, waving his hands, yelling in Spanish or Peruvian or something. Crystals from the windshield flew around the cab, scattering with every gesture. They were all over my pants, stuck to my shirt – they looked just great, I thought, like garments sewn with jewels. Except the guy would not shut up. He screamed at me. "Who pay?" he said. "Who pay?"

"You got insurance, right?" He didn't answer, so I said, "Insurance," like the cop had told me "In-fes-tation." "You're not insured, that's your fault, right, not mine. You know?"

But he kept on, "Who pay?" and presently I realised what the trouble was: he claimed on this, his premiums went up. That's it. That's all it was. We'd fought a space lizard, we'd beaten off a monster, we were heroes, we were pals, and all this idiot could think about was premiums! I said, "You drive a cab? Alright! Occu-fucking-pational hazard number one, amigo. *Space monsters!*" I pushed the door handle. It wouldn't budge. "OK, OK," I said. "You helped me out. You did, and I am thankful. I would have got along OK without you, sure, but, well – alright. I'm grateful, yeah? But you remember this: all you did for me was just your duty as a citizen, you know? That's all. In this country, that's how we are. Like, if it was me here in the cab and I saw

you out there, you think I'd drive on by? Hell, no! You think I'd end up talking 'bout insurance? I would not!"

He reached under the seat, pulled out a tyre iron.

"Now you hold on a minute. You hold on."

"Money," he said.

"Alright, alright! I owe you for the ride, no prob. Just put the iron down, we'll talk, OK? That's an offensive weapon. You can do time for that, you know. It's not Dodge City."

I smiled at him. I reached into my pocket. But right away, he'd got his hand in too, and took out my entire clip. He held the iron about half an inch back from my nose.

"You can't do that, man. I got your licence number, see? I'm going to the cops. You're doing time, you don't give that straight back."

I made to grab the iron, wasn't quick enough. We tussled for a minute. He was yelling at me, "Fuck you! Fuck you!" Next thing, the door was open, I was out and on my back, sprawled on the sidewalk. I jumped up, but he'd got the car in gear and he was off, the door still swinging wide.

I hadn't got his number. His licence plate was – I don't know. It had an L in it. Maybe a 4. It all happened too fast.

I should have concentrated. Memorised it. I could have sued him for a million dollars then, and won, as well. Been sitting pretty all my days if I'd done that.

It's only afterwards you really start to think about it.



I'm not a bad person. I have a code of honour. I'm an honourable guy. And I believe I'm trustworthy. Like, I say I'll do a thing, I'll do it. But I'm freelance, and a freelance has to look out for himself. Cream a little here, cream a little there, to get you through the lean times. That's the way it works. Except that now the fucking cabbie'd got my profit, and the money from the dog-guy, too.

And I was not about to see the cream again for many days, I could be very, very sure.

It almost made me give up and go home. But then, I'm honourable, like I say. I had a job to do.

Besides, you sometimes got a little on delivery. A tip, a service charge.

Worth the chance, I thought.

Cloisters is in Tryon Park, in the very north-west corner of Manhattan. It's a monastery, a *bona fide* medieval monastery, shipped over block by block from Europe in the days when rich people had nothing else to spend their money on. I mean, before they'd heard about cocaine.

A road ran up the hillside. Grass grew through it, trees grew over it; the city sound sank back to white noise, far below. Only on the final bend I saw the place. Stern and silent, ancient beyond years, squatting on the hilltop like a Buddha. Many words came to my mind describing it: impressive, sober, stately, strong... Mostly, though, the word was, 'creepy'.

You know those movies where the stranger calls at the castle and it's full of vampires, zombies and whatever?

I lit a cigarette. I looked around. There was a door, alright, but I didn't feel like using it just yet. I smoked a while. I called

out, "Hi there!" No-one answered, so I finished up my smoke. Then turned the handle.

The door came open, quietly and easily. It didn't even creak.

Stone steps rose up through a passage like a throat.

I said, "Hello?"

It was the moment to turn back. Tell Reuben, "Sorry, no-one home." Or sell the gear to dog-man. I was tempted. Tempted, yes; but that's all.

I took the first few steps, and then a few more. I could hear a sound now, faint and tinkling, and so fragile it was almost like the echo of a dream, a beautiful, unearthly sound... It drew me on, pulling me upward. Pulling me in.

Once upon a time the whole place was an art museum, and it still had pictures. In a hallway at the stairhead I swapped a glance with Christ, pinned to his cross. I looked him in his poor, sad, dying face and told him, "Me too, pal." But the sounds were louder now. Harp music, I guessed. And voices. Women's voices. Talking, laughing...

"Hi? Hello?" My words were barely audible. It's like I couldn't even dent the air.

I walked on, following the music, through stone rooms draped with tapestry and littered with abandoned furniture. Then I stopped, and stared, and didn't move again for quite some time.

It was a scene out of an epic: that glimpse you get of quiet, down-home life, of ladies in their castle while the menfolk are out slaughtering and pillaging; that little isle of innocence, those childish games, that calm, that peace... I'd seen the movies, now I stood there, spellbound by reality. The creatures up ahead weren't human, that was obvious; and yet to me, in that brief moment, they seemed *more* than human, more elegant, more graceful, more alive...more *feminine*. Yes. That was part of it, as well. A big, big part.

Imagine bodies of astonishing, inhuman beauty, curving and voluptuous, curved the way a scimitar is curved, a steely, shining grace in every move, a power and strength unknown, even to the best Manhattan models; limbs so wonderfully articulate the slightest gesture might convey a lexicon of feeling, insight and expression...

There were three of them. One, off to the side, plucked at a harp big as a grand piano. This was the music I'd been hearing, and strange music it was, no melody, no beats or repetition, no patterns I could make out. Rather it seemed to flow like water, always changing, always new. Sometimes, on the point of resolution, it would shift abruptly and move on, striking off in new directions. Music from another world, the music of the spheres...

A second woman, who looked so much like the first I thought they must be sisters, stood, dressing the hair of a third. And it was this, the last of them, who really caught my eye. *The Queen*, I thought at once – not like the Queen of England, not a title, but a quality, a selfhood, queenly like a queen bee, like a creature *born* to be the queen, raised and destined for the part. She sat upon a simple wooden chair, but there was no doubting her status. And the handmaiden was taking sheaves of her luxuriant black hair, plaiting it with silver filigree, interweaving

light and dark, day and night. I say her hair was black; but then, the more I looked, the more I seemed to see all kinds of other colours in it, too: dark reds, maroons and purples, indigos and blues... The planes of her face were sharp and angular, her lips firm cushions, her eyes – her eyes were startling, almond shapes that seemed to glitter with a light all of their own.

There was no door to knock upon.

I coughed.

It was as if I'd thrown a stone into a pool.

The music lurched and shuddered to a halt. The tableau froze, dissolved.

The women turned to me.

And I was Walter Raleigh. I was Sir Francis Drake. Yea, for I was courtliness made flesh. I'd seen the movies. How low I bowed, how graciously I swept my arm, my fingertips brushing the very stones on which I stood. I was perfect. Perfect. At least, I was until I had to speak, at which point everything began to get away from me.

"Uh, well, uh, hi," I said, not quite the stunning opener I'd been looking for. "I'm from, you know, from Reuben, yeah?"

When that got no response, I reached into my pocket and produced the box. I held it out in both hands. And what my words had failed to do, the sight of this did instantly.

The Queen was on her feet like she'd been zapped by lightning. Seven feet tall, a giantess. I stared. I could do nothing else. She had – what can I call it? *A presence*. An *aura*. So much power and dignity. Call it magic, call it pheromones, it doesn't matter which. I stood before a goddess, and I loved her, in that moment I can truly say, I loved her with my whole heart.

She took the box, and where her fingers brushed my palms it was like electricity, tingling my nerves. A light came to her face; it seemed to gleam beneath her skin. Her lip curled up. It was a smile I would have died for. I saw it with my eyes but felt it in my guts, my loins, the very centre of my being. She slit the wrapper with a fingernail. The ribbon fluttered to the floor. All was fever, urgency. A long tongue snaked between her lips. Her eyes were wide. She held the glass vial in her hand, she held it between long, thin fingers...

And she screamed.

She reared back, body stretching in a way that I would never have believed was possible. In shock, in horror. Her hand veered up. She flung the vial. I heard it clunk, and roll. An awful choking sound came from her throat. The two ladies-in-waiting rushed to comfort her. She threw them off. And then she glared at me.

Reuben had once tried teaching me some swear words in his own tongue. It wasn't a good class. Not only could I not pronounce them, but it all got worse when he began explaining what they meant. Odd, mathematical ideas, the bulk of them, and terms like 'breach' or 'inanition', which seemed to have some special, lurid meaning I had failed to grasp. I never learnt to swear in alien. But I knew cuss-words when I heard them, and what the Queen was calling me just then did not need subtitles, I'm telling you.

The only thing that baffled me was, why.



She came toward me. I stepped back. She took another stride. And back, again. Her hands were up. Long nails. Long, gleaming nails. I think she could have ripped my face off with those nails. Her features twisted and then set like iron.

I didn't even think where I was going. My legs moved under me, carrying me off.

Then something stopped me with a jolt.

The two ladies-in-waiting. They'd come at me from either side, their hands clamped on my arms, and now their mistress bore down on me with a will. Whatever was about to happen, it was clear that I would not enjoy. I wriggled a moment, then – I don't know how I did it – at once I ducked, threw myself back, and broke out of their grip. Running, stumbling through these ancient rooms, down the steps, faster and faster, till I seemed to fly over the last few stairs; fell, crashed into the door, and out.

I didn't even bother with the road. Just ran. South. Through the park. Jumping over walls, wading, knee deep in the flower beds. Anything to get away.

When I saw signs for the subway, I went straight to it. The lights were flickering down there – the power must have been fritzed – but I just didn't stop to think. My footsteps echoed in the concrete hall. I wanted out, I wanted home, I wanted downtown – some place sane, some place not full of crazy folk and monsters. But even as I reached the barrier my hopes died, twisting on the cruel spike of reality. Great scary shapes came drifting through the murk towards me. White as maggots, with shapeless, swollen limbs, their faces blank, devoid of life. And when they spoke, it was in ugly mimicry of human tones.

"Hey, kid," said one. "Don't wanna be here, kid."

"No trains," the other said.

Instead of faces they had glassy panels that reflected my own fright, my own terrified eyes and mouth.

"Got trouble down here."

"Infestation."

"In..." I stammered, trying to make some sense of things, "fes...?"

"...station."

"Bugs," the other monster said. "Alien, off-world bugs. Don't wanna use the subway, kid. It's all closed down."

"How'd you miss the signs, any case? Can't read?"

They wore suits. Contamination suits. It's like my eyes came into focus suddenly. They were men, like me. Ordinary, earth-bound men. Regular joes. One guy held a bucket. He set it down. Something like a weed or maybe hair was hanging out over the rim, and as I looked I saw it stir a little, shake its long, thin tendrils back and forth, like it was just sniffing the air...

I turned around and got right out.

"You fucked up."

"No, Rube, no, it wasn't like that, honest. Traffic was a nightmare, and –"

"You fucked up. Understand?"

It was a Czech place down on First. I'd been avoiding him all week, and doing it successfully, till one day, there I was, minding my own business, and I stopped to light a smoke and some-

one rapped the window right beside me, so I almost jumped out of my skin, and when I looked around, that somebody was Reuben, sitting at a table, summoning me in. And he would not take no.

He pushed another blintz into his mouth. I sat across, empty-bellied yet again, just watching. I reached out for his plate. He slapped my hand away.

"Know what you did? Work it out, did you?"

"Yeah. Well. Look. Alright. I fucked up. You tell me, so I guess it's true. But *everyone* fucks up! It happens! Just think of all the times I *don't* fuck up, yeah? How about them?"

I pushed my chair back, starting to stand.

"You sit the fuck back down."

I'd like to say that it was mind control, but really, it was fear; and there was something in his voice that made me do exactly what he said.

I sat the fuck back down.

He put another blintz between his lips. Incisors bit down, scissored it in half. His tongue flicked out. It had a weird, purplish look, not what you'd call inhuman but not normal, either.

"You *know* what you did?"

I looked round for excuses. Didn't find them. "No," I said at last.

"Good. Here lies the start of knowledge." He gave a not entirely pleasant smile. "Know what a sperm is?"

"Huh?"

"Sperm. Spermatozoa. Jizz. You got another term for it? Something I haven't heard?"

"Sperm," I said. "OK..."

"Well." He inspected his half-a-blintz, a bit suspiciously, I thought, like he wanted to interrogate the thing; then put it in his mouth. "What you were meant to be," he said, "is like the tail on the sperm." He shoved his index finger at me. "Clear?"

"Um... Pardon me?"

"Sperm. Yeah? Baby batter? Gene juice? I saw this on TV. Like, human reproduction?"

"What?"

"I'm trying to make it easy for you, kid. Put it in terms you'll understand. Sperm goes to the egg, see? It's got a tail for that. Flicks side to side. Propulsion, you know? Well that, kiddo, is you. Get it?"

"Is this, um...are you insulting me or something? 'Cos I'm not exactly sure I'd know."

"You," he said, "were the tail on the sperm."

"Translation?"

"Like I said. *Propulsion*. Least – you fucking should have been."

I held my hands up. "Hey, I told you – I mean, there were people out there hunting me, you know. Hunting! I never had to go through that before."

"Sperm." He wriggled his hand. "Through the city, right? Through the city streets. Through all those twisty little tubes..."

"What you talkin' about, man?"

"'Bout your job, the way I see it. 'Bout what you should've done."

"I told you. I had problems. There were guys – creatures – I



dunno. Like maybe they were out to kill me. They all wanted the parcel. I wouldn't give it. I *protected* it. I'd sort of like some credit there, you know."

"You try a cab? The way I told you?"

"Sure! He took my fucking money, man! He robbed me. He took *everything*!"

"Well, that sounds like real bad luck. Specially since it's my money he took. And here's some more bad luck. You know how long a sperm lives?"

This really did sound like a threat. I shook my head.

"No," he said. "Me neither. But not long, I'd say. No indeed. Few hours, maybe. Something like?"

"Hey! The stuff I went through! Come on!"

"I think it's...oh, twenty hours, give or take. Terrestrial biology – not my strong suit, you know? But with these folk, I'd say, less. Got that?"

He leaned across the table. His teeth were yellow. He said, "What you did, you fucking asshole, is, you brought her dead sperm, see? Any notion what that's like to them? Do you? Like a dead fucking baby, man. *That's* what it's like."

Reuben chewed. He watched me. I was about to say,

"Well, if I'd known..." but that would have been owning up, which didn't seem too smart a move.

He took a swig of beer. He looked at me. "You know," he said, "a lot of us – us newcomers..." He put the bottle down. I reached for it. He knocked my hand away. "We find out how you do it, you guys, and it's – *yech*. I mean, it's laugh or barf, you know? It doesn't really...further our respect, know what I'm saying?"

He wasn't angry with me. The thought slowly congealed inside my head. He actually wasn't angry. Or at least, not like I'd thought he was.

"I mean," he said, "you *pee* through those things, right? That's no way to bring your kids into the world now, is it?"

"Works for us," I said, defensively. "It's fun." Then, "What do you...?"

"Where kids should come from." He touched his yarmulke. "I said it kept me warm. Does, too. And helps protect my...modesty."

"You're shitting me."

He raised his brows.

"You are! You're shitting me."

"One more thing." He put the last blintz in his mouth. He pushed his chair back. "They were lousy clients, anyhow. Glad to be rid of 'em. But still...fact remains. You fucked up, and I gotta let you go."

He stood. "Think how it looks," he said. "Word gets out I use a fuck-up for deliveries..." He ambled past me. "See you, kid."

"Rube," I called out. "Rube!"

He looked at me.

I said, "Why were they chasing me? Just tell me that? What did they want? You set me up? Did you?"

"Hell, no."

"Then what –"

"Human terms, again. You ever eaten caviar?"

"Oh sure," I lied.

"You like it?"

"Course I do. It's caviar."

"Well. Tastes like salt to me. But here's the thing: there's folks that'll do anything for stuff like that. And what you had, what you were carrying – it's kind of the equivalent. To some. Like, these guys, they get a whiff of it...sends 'em wild, I guess."

He shrugged. "I told you, get a cab."

"But Rube," I said. "What do I do? What do I live on? How do I pay the rent, get food and smokes? Reuben –"

"That my problem?" And then he'd gone.

I sat there. For a long time I could barely move. My innards sagged. I couldn't even lift myself out of the chair.

But slowly – I was staring out the window all this time – slowly I came to see the city all around me once again, the people moving past, each one different, each one with a plan, a dream... And I thought, hell. If they can make it, what's the difference? So can I. This was New York, the greatest town on Earth. I wasn't going to starve. I wasn't going to die.

And on my way out, I lifted twenty dollars from atop some dumb schmuck's wallet, just took it while his back was turned; and then I ran, and ran, and ran.

Those who read 'The Corner of the Circle' in issue 218 will recognise the world of 'Crosstown Traffic', a New York just a few degrees removed from ours. Tim's new novel, *Frankenstein's Prescription*, was recently published by Tartarus Press (tartaruspress.com) and an interview in connection with this appears in the April issue of *Interzone's* sister magazine *Black Static*, along with a new story. Tim currently divides his time between Manchester, England and Chicago, Illinois.

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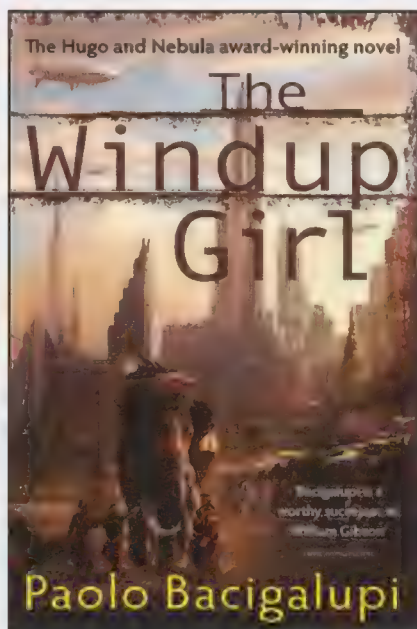
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THE WINDUP GIRL

Paolo Bacigalupi

Orbit, 513pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Jim Steel

Bacigalupi's first novel has already won most of the awards that it is eligible to win and it is currently shortlisted for the BSFA Award. It is probably the most decorated first novel in science fiction history but those of us who were already familiar with the astonishing short stories that preceded it already knew that something special was awaiting us and the awards merely prove that he is easily able to scale up to the longer length while retaining the same qualities.

The novel is based in the same world as some of those short stories. Thailand, maybe a century or more down the road from here, is still an independent kingdom but it is not a pleasant place to live. Nor is the rest of the world, come to that, not since the economic contraction that brought about a global collapse.

Anderson Lake is the gateway into the novel for our western eyes. He's an AgriGen calorie man which is the equivalent of an oil executive. Of course, there is no oil left any longer and the energy comes from more recent forms of life. Airships cross the skies and clippers span the rising oceans but on land a large amount of energy comes directly from muscle power. Giant genetically-engineered elephants wind power into fantastically efficient springs in the SpringLife factory that Lake is inspecting, but Lake's real objective is tracking down

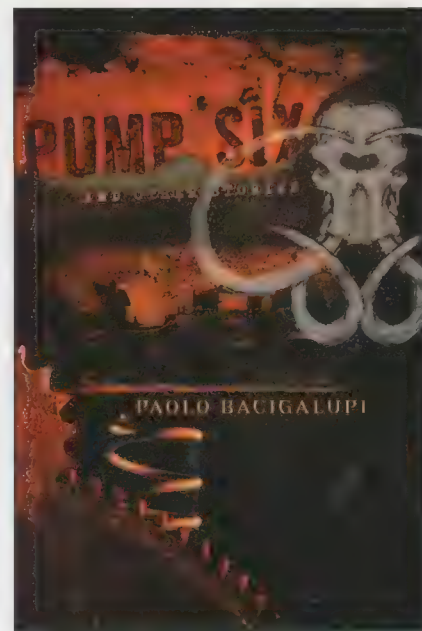
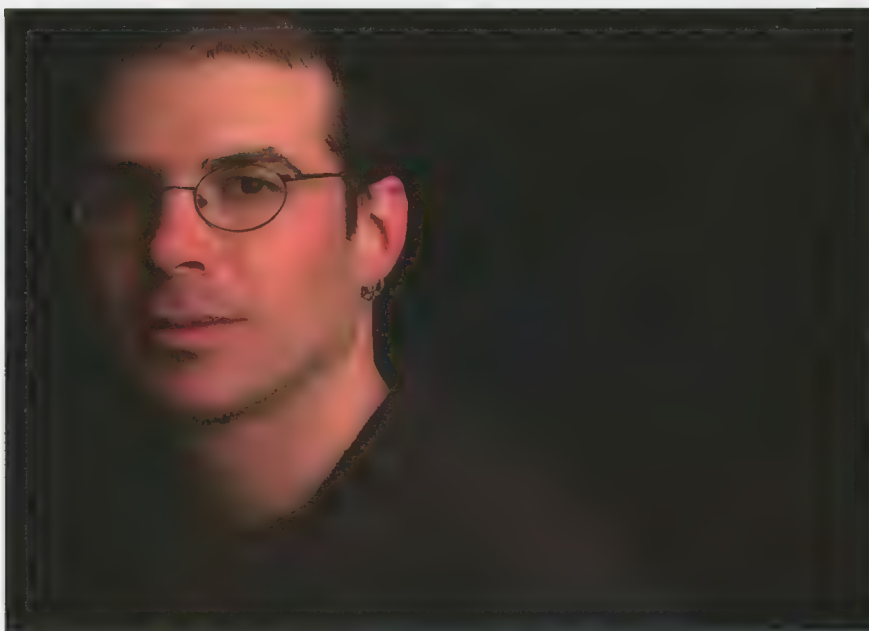
the source of the new fruits and vegetables that are appearing in Thailand. Much of the world's food sources have been rendered useless in a biotech arms race that resulted from companies releasing viruses to wipe out their competitors' products. Thailand, however, seems to have escaped the worst. There might be a secret seed bank, but the prime suspect is Gibbons, a genius of a genetic engineer who has gone rogue and is suspected to be living somewhere, Kurtz-like, in Thailand.

Lake, however, is not the reader. He may be sympathetic at times (most of Bacigalupi's characters generally are if approached from an appropriate direction), but he is too angular for the reader to grasp and he has too many moral compromises folded into his being. There are others. Lao Gu, a bitter old man who has already fled one genocide, is a survivor who is well aware of his precarious legality in his new country. The heroic Jaidee is an honest policeman doing his best to prevent smuggling (and the consequential crop contamination) when being honest means being poor. His number two, Kanya, maybe sees things more clearly and is consequently more troubled. And of course there is the Windup Girl herself. Emiko is a genetically-engineered Japanese woman who was abandoned in Thailand by her owner and who has been reduced to being abused in a brothel. A curious creation, she is so ill-adapted to the climate that she risks death from heat exhaustion if she flees, and she also suffers from layers of programming that twist her personality into bizarre shapes.

Into this teetering, brutal world comes a violent revolution which is ignited from a spark that is eerily prescient of the start of the current Arabic revolutions. The motivation of the characters is probably the key to the novel, especially when survival suddenly becomes a short-term goal. Nobody can stand still here but, on the occasions when a moral choice presents itself, what are the characters to do? Do their decisions matter on the larger stage? Can they even see all of the consequences of their actions?

It's an astounding novel with a freshness that recalls the rush of first discovering *Neuromancer* or *Snowcrash* for oneself. It also tackles the big subjects of the twenty-first century on a human level and, ultimately, that's the way each and every one of us has to face the world.

Paolo Bacigalupi interviewed →



THE WINDUP MAN: PAOLO BACIGALUPI interviewed by JIM STEEL

Although biotechnology has exploded there's not much in the way of renewable energy sources or information technology in *The Windup Girl*. Is that a narrative device on your part or is it something more fundamental such as a mineral shortage?

It's a manipulation that started with my short story 'The Calorie Man'. I'd been thinking about peak oil, and I'd also been thinking about agribusiness, and I wanted to talk about food as a source of power, so combining those made sense from an aesthetic perspective for me. Sometimes readers accept this distortion of the world, sometimes they don't. I didn't do much with information technology, frankly, because it doesn't interest me a great deal. Other writers do great work in that arena, so I'd only be repeating what they have to say.

You're someone who invests a lot in his characters and it comes as a genuine shock to the reader whenever one of your major characters dies – you've even managed to make a sympathetic character out of someone who shoots children for a living ('The Pop Squad') – and I get the feeling that you didn't want to abandon one character who dies halfway through the novel. Was their continuation afterwards, such as it was, a gift to the reader, or was the author giving himself a present?

A dozen vivid short stories in the first decade of this new century announced the arrival of an important new talent in Paolo Bacigalupi. Those stories have been collected in *Pump Six and Other Stories* and he has recently started publishing novels with *The Windup Girl* and the young adult *Ship Breaker*. He lives in Colorado and writes environmental journalism for *High Country News*.

Without going deeply into the spoilers, I actually did it because I specifically wanted to have a ghost in the story. Many Thais take ghosts (or phii) seriously, and I wanted to respect that in the text. If your characters come from a certain cultural background, and ghosts are reasonable from their perspective, then you take that seriously.

Gibbons (a shadowy biotech engineer) is a character who by his very nebulosity seems like a conscious evocation of Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene. And then there is Anderson Lake (one of my favourite characters). Was Anderson's first name chosen in order to give him the flavour of a thriller character? And who are your influences both inside and outside the field?

I think I might have grabbed Anderson's name because of Arthur Anderson, the consulting company. I've never really liked consultants very much. They seem very confident of themselves. As for influences, sure, Graham Greene and John le Carré and stories like that intrigue me, but my influences are pretty nebulous. I was reading David Quammen's *Song of the Dodo* when I was starting to work on *The Windup Girl* and that probably had as much or more influence. And then there are writers like Cormac McCarthy or J.G. Ballard or George R.R. Martin or Ursula Le Guin or William Gibson, and they all have their part in my writing DNA.

Why Thailand? You've spent a lot of time there, but you've also spent a lot of time in China and other places.

Thailand has a proud history of repelling foreign colonialism. It's the only country in South East Asia that stayed independent while the British and the French were busy carving up the region. If you're going to write about a country fighting for survival against the aggressions of foreign corporate powers, there's a useful mirroring there.

I noticed that you were having fun with the names of characters. There is a Sir Frances Drake and a Raleigh, not to mention Peters and Lei. You come across as a writer who likes to plant surprises in his work.



Yes, I like dropping easter eggs into my stories. A lot of things in the stories are mentioned or named, and certain readers with certain backgrounds will pick up an extra layer of nuance that I deliberately don't describe in the story. I don't mind if there are many layers to a piece as long as the core plot works for every reader. They're all small things, but they add texture to the story for me.

Is *The Windup Girl* a pastiche of steampunk on one level? You use plenty of the tropes: airships, clippers, spring-driven machines, even the mechanical movements of the windup people.

No. I wrote about dirigibles because they're a promising low-cost heavy-lift device. I used springs, because I wanted to dramatize the movement of calories into joules – plant energy into life and kinetic energy, and so when it's stored, I wanted the energy to be stored in its kinetic form. The stuttery movements of windups came from a stewardess I saw on a flight to Japan, who moved in very strange, stuttery, robotic way. At root, I think of myself as writing science fiction, which I think of as being forward-looking and extrapolative. Steampunk strikes me as being associated with fantasy, and deeply tied with nostalgia. That said, if a reader experiences a whiff of steampunk in *The Windup Girl*, and they like it, I certainly won't refuse the sale.

Almost half of Americans and over a third of Britons think that global warming is at the least exaggerated and

at worst an outright fraud. Have you experienced any negativity towards your fiction or yourself personally because of this? And if so, has it been any worse than reactions to your journalism?

In general, it seems that those people who don't believe in global warming aren't actually my readers. They're already sealed inside a self-reinforcing information bubble, so whatever I write doesn't exist as far as they're concerned. In any case, I get very little criticism or attention from the denialist set.

In 'The Tamarisk Hunter' you have a man who plants an invasive species in order to collect the bounty, which seems like an analogy for much of what is happening at a global level today with proposals such as carbon trading. Most of what you write suggests that we are finished as a technological civilisation because it's in our very nature to fail on this level. Is there hope?

To be honest, I'm a bit tired of hearing about how some great technology will save us down the road in the future someday blah blah blah. I'd like to see measurable reversals, happening now, before I start feeling hopeful. I'd like to see us stop pumping carbon into the atmosphere, a reduction of human population to a lower carrying capacity, and no more human-caused extinctions of other species, to name a few off the top of my head. At that point, there's hope. Until then, we're just going deeper into the red.

You've mentioned previously that you are setting your next couple of novels in "fairly ravaged worlds". *The Windup Girl* is set in the same world as 'Yellow Card Man' and 'The Calorie Man'. Are you going to continue building there?

Well, my next books are actually young adult novels. One of them is out already, called *Ship Breaker*, and now I'm working on a companion novel, and while they're set in a peak oil, global-warming hellzone, it's not the same world. As far as the universe of *The Windup Girl* goes, it's possible that there's a worthwhile project set in a country that has been completely dominated by the calorie companies, and in exploring what that looks like. Regardless, though, it won't be a direct sequel, and it won't follow Emiko or be set in Thailand.

Several of Paolo's short stories are available online and can be found at his website: windupstories.com



THE DIVINER'S TALE

Bradford Morrow

Corvus, 311pp, £16.99 hb

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

In *The Diviner's Tale* Bradford Morrow's protagonist is named Cassandra Brooks, reflecting her two primary functions within this novel, to be disbelieved, and to be involved with water. Perhaps too, they suggest that Cass cannot refuse her destiny to be a water diviner but that would suggest this novel follows the familiar track of a character needing to acknowledge her latent powers whereas Cass is all too aware of her abilities. Instead, I think Morrow is essaying a more subtle discussion about the responsibilities that come with certain skills.

A clue to this is the fact that Morrow eschews a fantasy landscape in favour of a contemporary setting. Cass, a teacher and single mother of twin boys, lives in a small close-knit community in the north-east US, the town where she has lived in most of her life. Admittedly, this is almost a stereotype but Morrow ensures this is no small-town idyll. Cass's skills as a diviner are not remarkable; she is her father's daughter, and dowsing skills are valued when water is at a premium. When, late on, Neptune tells Cass that he was a fraud, she is not surprised, having based her own work on careful research but one suspects that both have combined knowledge and instinct without ever questioning it. It is the acceptance of the validity of both ways

of working that lies at the heart of this novel.

Cass also has precognition, among other things predicting the car crash that killed her brother, but has always kept quiet about this particular skill, understanding that it is not always so welcome. Things change when Cass finds the body of a young girl hanging from a tree while dowsing a client's land. When she returns with the police, the body has vanished, and she is suspected of an overactive imagination. The police do discover a runaway girl who looks similar to Cass's description but she is not satisfied with this explanation, not least because she also receives a series of mysterious threats referring to the discovery and the presence of the hanged girl remains. At the same time, the community withdraws from Cass, no longer sure of who or what she is. Cass's choice lies in attempting to conform to her sense of what the community needs her to be or else in being true to herself and seeking an explanation of events, the key to which lies in events she has suppressed.

As fantasy novels go, this is low-key, to the point where some might wonder if the events aren't simply the imaginings of a lonely woman. It is Cass's own matter-of-fact account that convinces us that her experiences are genuine and must be addressed on their own terms. It is also true that Cass's account of living with her powers is rather stronger than the other strand of plot, where speculation about a possible instigator far too quickly becomes certainty with very little actual evidence until much later on. In the end, I'm not sure it matters, because Cass's growing acceptance of all her skills is what the novel is primarily about.

Bradford Morrow is the founder and editor of *Conjunctions*, the literary magazine which, several years ago, published the much-discussed *The New Wave Fabulists*, guest-edited by Peter Straub. A glance through his backlist indicates that Morrow has incorporated fantastic elements into earlier novels and suggests that its appearance in *The Diviner's Tale* is not an outlier but part of a much broader pattern of use. His fiction will probably not be to the taste of those like their fantasy to have epic proportions but I think *The Diviner's Tale* will appeal to those interested in the ways in which the fantastic weaves its way in and out of daily life. Certainly, this novel has impressed me sufficiently that I want to read his earlier work.



WILDE STORIES 2010: THE YEAR'S BEST GAY SPECULATIVE FICTION
 Edited by Steve Berman

Lethe Press, 227pp, \$15.00 tpb

Reviewed by John Howard

Wilde Stories 2010 is the third annual volume in the series which aims to present the best gay speculative fiction published during the preceding year. A volume of *Wilde Stories* is therefore more than just another 'Year's Best' – it is also effectively a themed anthology. And it is appropriate that *Wilde Stories* gathers the fiction that dare not speak its name: after all, the 'speculative' has often been, and sometimes still is, the controversial outcast: counter, original, spare, strange.

In his introduction Steve Berman states that the focus of the stories included is that they have gay male protagonists. (It can be taken for granted that the quality of the stories is a criterion for inclusion.) It's as simple as that. As Berman also points out, some of the contributors are women; and he says he neither knows nor cares what an author's orientation is. (In any case, how could you tell? One of the grossest errors is to assume that an author's characters automatically allow definite connections to be made and conclusions drawn. Nevertheless, if the reader wishes, there could be a little extra sport. The speculative aspect here is thus not only confined to the anthology's contents.)

This time round Berman presents twelve stories first published in 2009. The sources include such standard-bearing magazines

as *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *Black Static*, original horror fiction anthologies, and gay journals. (Three of the stories first appeared in publications from Lethe Press itself, in its role as a specialist publisher of LGBT books of all kinds.) The contents of *Wilde Stories 2010* illustrate an Oscar Wilde dictum: "The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible." And the visible mysteries we get are not only those to be found in such places as crowded cities and rural retreats, modern America and medieval China, a mining planet and a train halted by snow in the middle of nowhere. They also include the mysteries of how people conduct their lives while together or apart, in hopelessness or rapture, in an everyday setting being slowly penetrated by dream, legend or myth. The balance between fiction (call it speculative or one of the other usual terms) and gay is laid out and maintained. The fiction is the way through which differing invocations of the gay are brought out into the world.

For me, the high point of *Wilde Stories* is Richard Bowes' 'I Needs Must Part, the Policeman Said'. First published in *F&SF*, it formed an instalment in an ongoing series which will eventually become part of an autobiographical novel. Without exception these have been thoughtful, moving, and often unsettling stories. Here the parting that needs must turns out to be from the very self – the self of the present from the other one, younger and earlier. Bowes explores aspects of the gay cult of youth, the achievements of aging, memories and their possible manipulation, the varying natures of companionship, and much more besides. Other particularly notable stories include Laird Barron's 'Strappado', 'Ne Que V'on Desir' by Tanith Lee (writing as Judas Garbah), 'Some of Them Fell' by Joel Lane [from *Black Static*], 'Death in Amsterdam' by Jameson Currier, and 'The Far Shore' by Elizabeth Hand. This last is an affirming modern take on an old national myth, which doesn't flinch from showing that love and fulfilment are not always limited to the individuals and can also involve loss.

When I slid the book out of its packaging and saw the cover my first thought was that either it goes or I do. But it grew on me and we're both still here. While yet exploring some true mysteries, first and foremost these *Wilde Stories* do the right thing, which is to entertain. I hope future releases will continue to do so.

lethepressbooks.com



LEVIATHANS OF JUPITER

Ben Bova

Tor USA, 477pp, \$24.99 hb

Reviewed by Duncan Lunan

In Ben Bova's *Jupiter* (2002), Grant Archer went deep into a liquid water ocean, and was brought back up by a huge creature, a Leviathan. Their cultural system ('Symmetry') has them leave their Kin to reproduce, coming under attack by carnivorous Darters. Archer helped one, and he hopes a second mission will prove them sentient, though Leviathans are colony organisms and reproduce by fission. He's opposed by Katherine Westfall, would-be Chairman of the International Astronautical Authority, who's murdered one scientist on the way to Jupiter and infected her successor with genetically modified rabies, before attempting to murder all the crew.

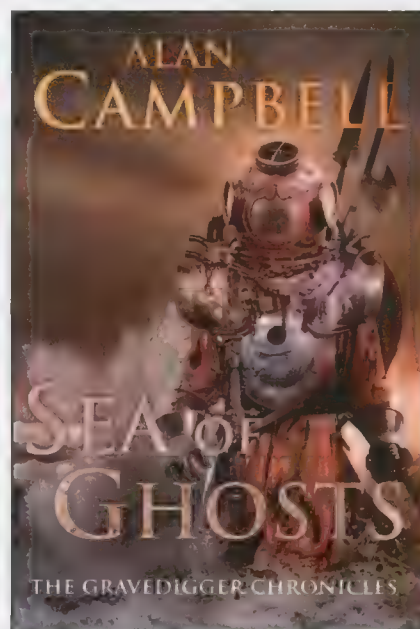
It's never a good sign when a character goes off to discuss her motivations with herself, as Westfall does repeatedly – pages 61, 237, 355, 476. Her sister died on a previous mission, so she must prevent Grant from sending more, but if human life is sacrosanct, why is she killing people? Oh yes – if Archer succeeds he'll qualify for the IAA Chair, but she must dominate any organisation she joins because of insecurities instilled by her mother. But why the IAA, and why the science route? Never explained. It's as if Margaret Thatcher's ambition drove her to stay in science and aim for Director of the Science Research Council, as it then was, instead of going into politics.

The good guys' behaviour is equally strange. The central character is brought all the way to the station orbiting Jupiter before she realises she's supposed to go into it. She's afraid to go, Westfall has the antidote to rabies and doesn't want her to go – but she's formed a high-school-type friendship with the other crew members, so she does it. I haven't read *Jupiter*, but I understand that in it the station had hyper-security. Now, even unprogrammed nanomachines that could kill everyone are left unguarded. "Scientists," the thief reflects, "they think everybody's honest." This, knowing there's a murderer aboard for whom genetically engineered organisms are the weapon of choice.

Years have passed since Grant's mission, and a cometary impact has cut off the Kin's food supply from above, forcing them to migrate thousands of miles within an ocean vastly larger than Earth. The research station isn't even in synchronous orbit. Yet the probe, manned or unmanned, finds the same group of Leviathans each time. And what do Leviathans look like? They're kilometres long, they have central brains with multiple eyes and flippers, so do they have heads or tails? Only in the last glimpse do we even learn they have backs which can bend.

The atmosphere above the ocean is rich with life, but below there are only Leviathans, Darters and some fish that swim with the Kin. Asimov calculated that if Jupiter had an internal ocean, with the same biomass density as Earth's oceans, the mass of living matter would be one-eighth of our Moon's! With that, Jack Cohen would keep filling ecological niches until the water was opaque (not to mention the text). In such an impoverished biosphere, Symmetry would require Leviathans to sacrifice themselves when they dissociate – Darters have nothing else to eat, and presumably they spare the newborn. The Leviathans couldn't evolve culturally otherwise. But if it's a symbiosis, neither side knows it: in hard times the Darters have formed larger packs, threatening the whole survival of the Kin. The Darters can form new strategies, communicate them to other groups, form alliances, but nobody asks: are *they* sentient?

The Leviathans communicate by showing one another pictures. Their colour range is greater than ours, so only a colour-blind human from Earth can read them. How did he get into space, when that's a bar to service in present-day armed forces? I like a book that raises more questions than it answers, but I have trouble with it in this case.



SEA OF GHOSTS

Alan Campbell

Tor UK, 437pp, £16.99 hb

Reviewed by Paul F. Cockburn

Alan Campbell is a writer with a refreshingly distinctive take on fantasy fiction; not only does he forsake the reactionary cod-medievalism of so many Tolkien copyists, but the conflict between his obvious love for, and rationalist doubts about, 'magic' ensure that his gritty writing always contextualises the supernatural within a defined and dramatically interesting framework. Although noticeable in his darkly ominous *Deepgate Codex* trilogy, in *Sea of Ghosts* Campbell gives us a world where being 'god-like' is no proof of being an actual deity; seemingly magical devices are tentatively described in terms coming close to quantum physics, while the driving forces of the plot are political and personal rather than occult.

The *Deepgate Codex* was, almost by definition, a story with a very large (and at times broadly-painted) cast of characters. In contrast, *Sea of Ghosts* is much more focused: former imperial soldier Colonel Thomas Granger is the sole point of view character for the first third of the book, while the remainder of the narrative is shared by him and just three other characters. Such is the strength of these, Campbell is able to use their individual perspectives to reveal the details of their world with an assured authorial confidence.

Granger is a loyal, plain-speaking, no-nonsense soldier who makes the mistake of mocking his weasel-like Emperor in public.

Forced to flee for his life, he eventually 'keeps his head down' as a private jailer in the prison city of Ethugru. When we encounter him six years later, however, it's fair to say that the civilian life has not been good for him, and he's slowly sinking into the mire until the arrival of a former flame and their daughter changes his life forever.

This is a world where a telepathic sisterhood, the Haurstaf, offer aid to humans against the ancient Unmer, a once-powerful and almost lost civilisation of 'entropic sorcerers and dragon-mounted warriors'. It soon becomes clear to Granger, however, that his daughter, Ianthe, has a unique 'supernatural' talent that makes her invaluable – not just to him, but the emperor, the Haurstaf and the criminal mastermind Maskelyne. We're talking high stakes of course: Ianthe could shift the balance of power unalterably in a world slowly but surely slipping beneath an increasingly toxic and dangerous sea.

The question of who controls – who 'owns' – Ianthe therefore becomes the main thrust of the narrative, with Granger first losing her to Maskelyne, a genuine sociopath who appears perfectly rational in his investigations of the Unmar technology, and protective of his young son, yet is clearly in love with the opportunities arising from being an evil bastard. This sets in motion a painful, hard chase across the world, with not just Granger but also the Haurstaf and the emperor in pursuit. Among other things, this takes in high sea adventure, a startlingly creepy ghost ship, 'magical' swords and a kamikaze flying chariot.

While by no means gratuitously violent, *Sea of Ghosts* is about people who are toughened (in some cases literally) by the world they live in. While a dark humour snakes its way through the narrative, there are several scenes which genuinely shock, most notably the mooted gang-rape of Ianthe and Maskelyne's complete misreading of his wife's protest. But this is tempered by a sense of cosmic justice – the former colleague of Granger who first betrays him and Ianthe to Maskelyne arguably gets his just deserts not once but twice, while the Haurstaf learn the hard way not to underestimate the consequences of human anger.

Sea of Ghosts manages the by-no-means-easy trick of providing an emotionally satisfying conclusion to the book while not lessening its preparation for the story's continuation in book two. As a result, Campbell's new trilogy, unlike Granger's old gaol, is built on very strong foundations indeed.



ENGINEERING INFINITY Edited by Jonathan Strahan

Solaris, 608pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Jack Deighton

According to Strahan's introduction this is a collection of stories roughly categorisable as Hard SF. He adds the disclaimer that the term is now a slippery concept hence the stories are inevitably broader in scope than might once have been implied. Whatever his claim that they all invoke the sense of wonder, most exhibit a tendency to be didactic in their narrative styles.

The tone is set early with 'Malak' by Peter Watts, the tale of an unmanned airborne war drone that learns from its experiences. Kristine Kathryn Rusch's 'Watching the Music Dance' deals with the effect of enhanced abilities for children on their dependency and psychological development. The ghosts of the Soviet space programme are being made real in 'Laika's Ghost' by Karl Schroeder, mainly set in the former cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. Stephen Baxter's 'The Invasion of Venus' is peculiar in that everything which happens, including the disappearance of the planet Neptune, occurs off stage. Apt, in that humans, and Earth, are of no consequence to the eponymous invaders. Hannu Rajaniemi's 'The Server and the Dragon' has an intergalactic AI on some inscrutable purpose creating a baby universe as its plaything before being suborned and consumed by a message packet it receives. Extremely dry in the telling, a knowledge of quantum physics and cosmology might be advantageous here.

'Charles Stross's 'Bit Rot' is a generation starship type story where the ship is 'manned' by cyborgs who are suffering the deleterious after effects of a gamma and cosmic ray burst. In 'Creatures With Wings', by Kathleen Ann Goonan, the remnants of humanity eke out their lives in what could almost be a zoo which the protagonist leaves to achieve enlightenment. Though Goonan tries to finesse it the story has too large a disjunction when these survivors are first taken from Earth by the creatures of the title.

'Walls of Flesh, Bars of Bone', by Damien Broderick & Barbara Lamar, is the story from which the collection's title may have sprung. A man sees himself on a film shot in 1931. The story moves on swiftly to become a concoction of quantum entanglement, self-interference of particles, Bayesian probability, spatial displacements and time travel. Robert Reed's 'Mantis' concerns the realness (or otherwise) of our experiences and how to tell whether or not we live in stories. The SF gloss involves two way CCTV type screens called infinity windows. The title of John C. Wright's 'Judgement Eve' evokes Edgar Pangborn. Unfortunately Wright is no Pangborn. The story, involving angels and Last Judgement, aspires to the condition of myth or Biblicality. As a result the 'characters' become cyphers, the prose overblown, the dialogue bombastic and syntactically archaic. In 'A Soldier of the City', by David Moles, the eponymous soldier volunteers for a revenge attack on the habitat of the terrorists who attacked his city and killed the goddess whom he loved.

The somewhat loopy protagonist of 'Mercies', by Gregory Benford, made rich by inventing a logic for constructing unbreakable codes, invests in and then uses quantum flux technology to 'jogg' to nearby timelines in order to execute serial killers before they set out on their sprees, thus becoming himself the object of the same fascination. In Gwyneth Jones's 'The Ki-Anna' a man travels to a distant planet to discover the circumstances surrounding his sister's death and encounters the obligatory strange and disturbing ritual practices. John Barnes's 'The Birds and the Bees and the Gasoline Trees' features a humanoid who has swum Europa's oceans and stridden the beds of Titan's methane seas unravelling the unforeseen consequences of humans trying to offset climate deterioration by seeding Earth's Southern Ocean with iron from meteorites.

Hard SF? Sense of wonder? In an uneven collection a few stories fail to hit the mark. Enough do, though.

**THE HAMMER****K.J. Parker**

Orbit, 448pp, £8.99 tpb

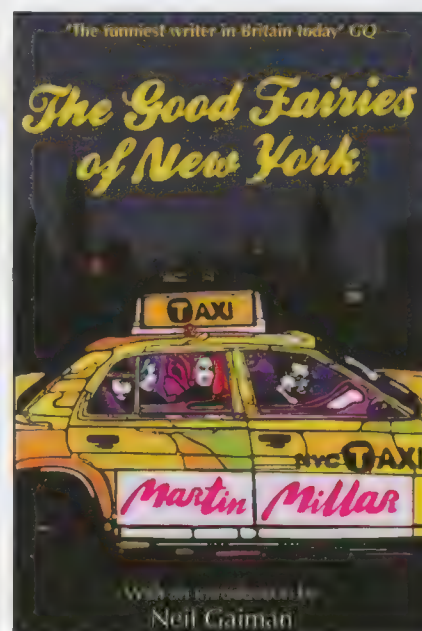
Reviewed by Jonathan McCalmont

Existing in the contested shatter zone between science fiction and fantasy, K.J. Parker's novels feature pseudo-medieval secondary worlds stripped of their traditional fantastical clutter and infused with the iron laws of physics and the golden principles of economics. This combination of Hard SF's love of scientific detail and fantasy's cod medievalism has produced such exquisitely researched and fiercely idiosyncratic works such as the *Fencer* and *Engineer* trilogies. Works that weave stories of human failure around accounts of the technical challenges involved in forging a good sword and mass-producing siege engines. Works which, despite being quite unlike anything else out there, frequently struggle to find the right balance between big ideas and human elements as avalanches of technical detail and historical research routinely bury both characters and narratives alike. Indeed, while K.J. Parker's early novels may be hugely original and fiercely intelligent they are also somewhat difficult to love. Parker's latest stand-alone novel, *The Hammer*, addresses many of the issues that plague her earlier works, resulting in a deliciously misanthropic tale of modernity, revenge and the terrifying nature of greatness.

Back in the old country, the met'Oc were something special. One of the world's great noble families, they produced generation upon generation of intelligent, ambitious

and ruthless children who were perfectly suited to the political and military challenges inherent in running a noble house. The met'Oc glared at the world with hungry eyes and the world shivered to its core. Then something happened and the met'Oc found themselves exiled to a penniless colony in the middle of nowhere. After trying in vain to take over the colony, the remaining met'Oc settled down into a resentful obscurity, their terrifying intelligence and savage ambition slowly turning sour as they abandoned the present in a desperate attempt to hang on to the glories of the past. Guignomai is the third son of the last generation of the met'Oc. Eminently practical, Guignomai knows that he will never return to the old country and has big plans for the colony. Plans for independence. Plans for making a fortune. Plans for an industrial revolution. Guignomai can make these plans a reality because he is a met'Oc, but because he is a met'Oc his motives are far from clear.

The Hammer is a novel concerned with the amorality not only of progress but also of justice itself. A novel that asks whether good things can come from the worst possible intentions and whether it is ever practical or desirable to do the right thing. Built upon the firm intellectual foundation provided by Parker's account of the process of industrialisation and her dazzling representation of the tensions between a medieval aristocratic mind-set and the unfolding economic realities of the Renaissance, *The Hammer* is a book filled with well-researched, wittily-presented insights into the workings of the early modern world. However, what makes this novel so enjoyable is not its speculation, but its grotesque humanity as, beneath the specific outer shell, there lurks the sort of mean and misanthropic hard-boiled crime story that you might normally expect from a writer such as Massimo Carlotto or Derek Raymond. The book's plot revolves around a man who decides to take revenge upon his dysfunctional family: Revenge for a miserable childhood. Revenge for an adulthood filled with neurosis and paranoia. Revenge for decades of abuse, cowardice and insanity. Revenge for everything that he is and everything that he could have been. Parker draws the hideous characters that make up the met'Oc family with a misanthropic glee that is powerfully reminiscent of Mervyn Peake at his best, revelling in their every failing and finding savage joy in the moment when their true barbarism is revealed. *The Hammer* is a novel by an author working at the very top of her game. It is a thing of terrible beauty.

**THE GOOD FAIRIES OF NEW YORK****Martin Millar**

Piatkus, 288pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Andy Hedgecock

In the late 1980s and early 1990s Martin Millar received considerable critical acclaim for his idiosyncratic and incisive explorations of post-industrial urban Britain – sometimes grittily authentic, sometimes with a dash of magic realism.

This reissue of *The Good Fairies of New York*, nineteen years after its original publication, gives readers new to Millar a chance to assess whether his work – with its obsessive focus on youth subcultures, rock idioms and the DIY sensibility associated with punk – remains relevant in an era of increasingly authoritarianism, corporatism and commodification. And it's a chance for older readers to evaluate whether the hard edged wit and irrepressible energy of Millar's work has stood the test of time.

Neil Gaiman's encomiastic introduction flings down a gauntlet on behalf of the book and its author: "Nor do I understand why Martin Millar isn't as celebrated as Kurt Vonnegut, as rich as Terry Pratchett, as famous as Douglas Adams. But the world is filled with mysteries". But this mystery is easily solved. Yes, Millar's tale of Thistle Fairies adrift in New York has much to offer in terms of vivid characterisation, quirky ideas and smart running gags. But it lacks the complex humanity of Vonnegut's work, the bleak comedic vision of Adams and the beautifully shaped and hilarious narratives of Pratchett at his best. And yet the book

is intriguing and witty enough to survive being oversold by its admirers. Heather and Morag, the green-kilted, sword and violin wielding thistle fairies make a spectacular entrance, stumbling through a fourth floor window and vomiting on the carpet of Dinnie – a seriously overweight and seriously unmusical misanthropist.

The post-punk imagery and ethos of the book is as relevant now as it was in the early 1990s. Millar's approach to his characters is life affirming without becoming mawkish, and he has a sharp eye for the risible. He pulls off the difficult trick of celebrating alternative lifestyles while satirising them – his blend of affection and mild scorn is engaging and palatable, and his deadpan style is accessible and entertaining.

The book is crammed with incident involving dying tramps, a lost violin, a Celtic flower alphabet, fairy racial tensions and the ghost of Johnny Thunders, legendary guitarist of the legendary New York Dolls. And there's no shortage of colourful subsidiary characters. But this is one of the problems with Millar's *Tale*. His vaguely sketched eccentrics crowd the narrative thick and fast – to an extent that it's in danger of collapsing under the weight of all this quirkiness. And while there are plenty of quirky ideas and deftly executed comedic set pieces it's a challenge, at the end of the book, to recall the story arc. It's easy to engage with the main characters but harder to elicit a clear idea of any psychological development or meaning relationship between them and the world they inhabit.

Music is important to Martin Millar. It's used to amusing effect here – Johnny Thunders and the Ramones play a significant part. But the link between music and character is less subtly developed than in *Suzy*, *Led Zeppelin and Me*, the author's later, more multifaceted and more coherent offering (originally published in 2002).

There's a line I've always liked in the old Peter Gabriel song 'Slowburn': "We've tried making movies from a volume of stills." That's what reading *The Good Fairies of New York* feels like – a series of well crafted, amusing snapshots which haven't been shaped into a coherent narrative. If it is to work, comedy needs coherence – however surreal it aspires to be, however rooted it is in a particular way of seeing. Having said that, Millar's book easily passes the six laugh test proposed by film critic Mark Kermode – there are incidents in here that may cause spluttered laughter on public transport. For that reason alone, we should welcome its return to print.



SYLVOW

Douglas Thompson

Eibonvale Press, 304pp, £6.99 pb

Reviewed by Ian Sales

Back in the day, fix-up novels were relatively common in science fiction. Authors would cobble together a bunch of stories, Sellotape a framing narrative in place, and pass off the finished product as a novel. In most such books, the joins were sadly obvious. If there's a term for the reverse – a novel which comprises standalone excerpts that have been published as short stories – I'm not aware of it. Nonetheless, it's a fair description of Douglas Thompson's second novel, *Sylvow*. Eight of the book's seventeen chapters have previously seen print: in *Ambit Magazine*, *Dream Catcher*, and the British Fantasy Society's *New Horizons* and *Dark Horizons*. While those chapters read perfectly well as short stories, they are also very much of the novel.

Sylvow is a story in many parts about a small group of people who all live in the invented city of Sylvow. However, the city, and the lives of its inhabitants, are slowly being invaded by Nature run rampant. Leo disappeared into the deep woods which ring Sylvow years before, and sends irregular letters commenting on, among other things, Nature's campaign of conquest. His estranged wife Vivienne takes up with Anton, who had a nervous breakdown but was cured by Franco, and now works as a forest ranger. Franco's wife Claudia is a vet, and she sees at first hand

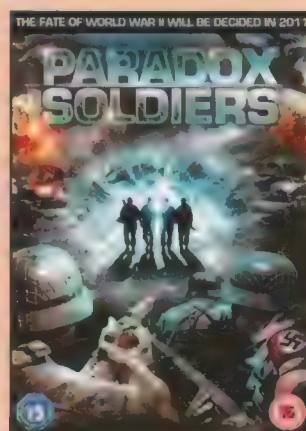
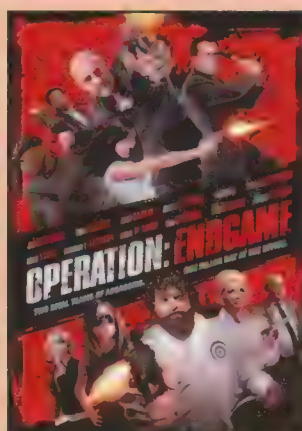
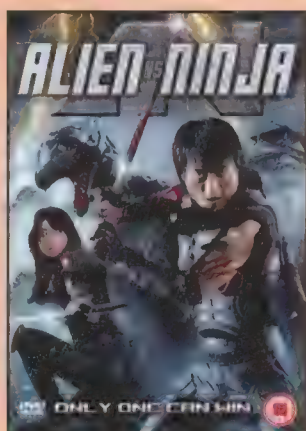
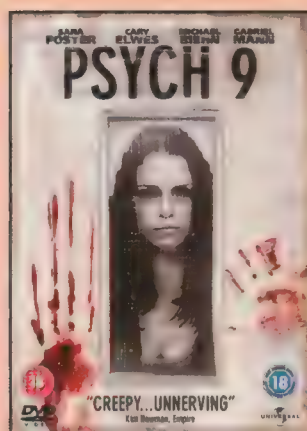
how the animal and insect kingdoms are responding to Nature's war on humanity and civilisation. Franco meanwhile is having an affair with Veronika, a young Goth patient.

According to the background notes at the rear of the book, the city of Sylvow is a fusion of Glasgow, Osnabrück and Novogrudok.

Certainly it seems at times to have a Middle European air, and the novel's cast all possess names more common in continental Europe than in the British Isles: Franco, Veronika, Claudia, Vittorio, Nikolaus... Yet there are references to very British institutions and cultural artefacts. It gives *Sylvow* a somewhat unsettled feel – further exacerbated by Thompson's prose style, which at times reads Ballardian and at others like the work of an East European fantasist. There are a variety of voices in *Sylvow*, but not all feel entirely suitable. Yet this too seems in keeping with the story *Sylvow* tells. Its narrative is episodic, and nominally linear, but not everything in the novel makes sense, or is capable of being understood.

Thompson aims high, but does not always hit his target. He is better when focusing on the surreal than he is at the quotidian. When read as a novel of disconnect, of humanity's failed attempts to understand, or come to an accommodation with, Nature and her needs, *Sylvow* works very well indeed. Many of the passages set in the forest showcase some lovely writing. As a novel of the relationships between people, *Sylvow* is perhaps less successful. The easy familiarity between family members, and between friends, often feels forced, as if Thompson were trying for the mannered tone of Mittel-Europa fiction but instead found himself writing the banal dialogue of a transatlantic mainstream novel. Nonetheless, despite the uneven read, despite its occasionally patchy nature, *Sylvow* is an intriguing blend of genres. With this novel, and his debut *Ultrameta*, Thompson has certainly shown he is a name to watch. Once he manages to write mainstream with the same facility he writes surrealism and genre, he's sure to produce something special.

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LASER FODDER TONY LEE

PSYCH: 9

• ALIEN VS NINJA

• OPERATION: ENDGAME

• PARADOX SOLDIERS

• VAMP

• PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 2

• PRIMAL

• THE LOST SKELETON
OF CADAVRA

• ALTITUDE

• SKYLINE

• THE UNIVERSE: 7 WONDERS
OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM

• THE GATHERING

• THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH
WIN THE 35TH ANNIVERSARY
BLU-RAY

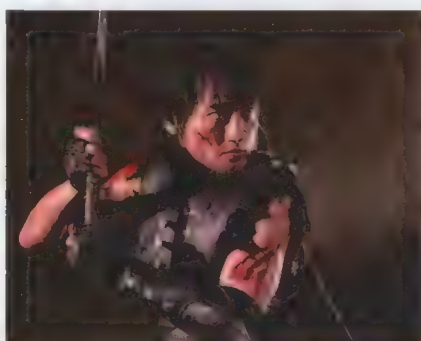
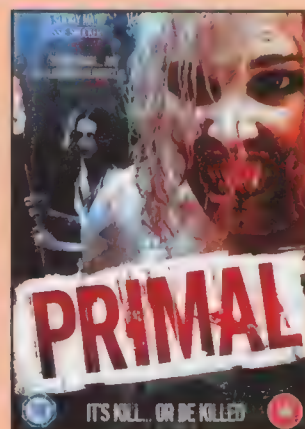
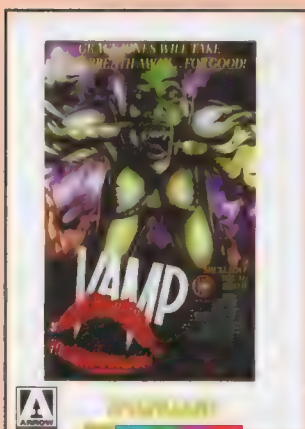
• LEGEND OF THE GUARDIANS

• INK



New filmmaker Andrew Shortell's **PSYCH: 9** (DVD, 17 January) starts with troubled nurse Roslyn (Sara Foster, from Angela Robinson's amusing comedy *D.E.B.S.* about schoolgirl secret agents) taking a nightshift job collating patient records at closed St Johns hospital. Nosy homicide detective Marling (Michael Biehn) prowls or patrols city streets where a 'Nighthawk' serial killer is on the loose, attacking blondes. Ros is in the rundown building alone, except for that nice Dr Clement (Cary Elwes) working upstairs on the more sensitive psych ward files. Reading when she should be packing away, Ros discovers pertinent facts about Nighthawk's victims, but apparently she's recovering from trauma (and still greatly disturbed by sexual abuse of her childhood), so it's no surprise when overstressed heroine starts hearing noises and seeing creepy spectres, generating neurotic anxieties that are not relieved by visits at work from her taxi-driver husband Cole (Gabriel Mann, *High Art*). Flickering CCTV and sickly green institutional décor ensures the prevailing

mood is downbeat, but so much so that the atmosphere suggests we must question everything about the muddled 'reality' of Ros' life and flaky rationality. Part mystery thriller, part haunted hospital chiller, vaguely reminiscent of movies like Brad Anderson's *Session 9* and Jaume Balagueró's *Fragile*, yet simply too haphazardly constructed, this haemorrhages logic (even dream sense!) with every twist of its second rate plot. Lacking a sufficient build up to its foreseeable revelations, there's just not enough emotional intensity or psychological depth here to fully distinguish it from a shelf load of similar quasi-paranormal flicks with mundane explanations: a final accounting of derangement/distortion that is weakly concealed throughout so it's not really worth waiting for demisting clarity in the fiery closure. If Elwes is OK as the 'sympathetic' shrink, and Colleen Camp is good as ER chief Beth – who's concerned for Ros' mental health – then Biehn only makes his presence felt to collect another pay cheque.

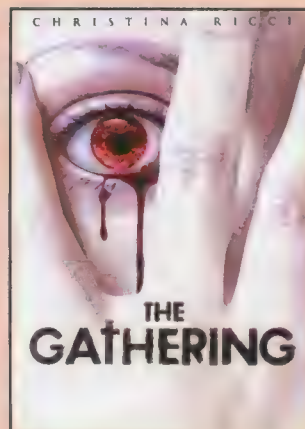


'Only one can win' notes the blurb. Seiji Chiba's **ALIEN VS. NINJA** (DVD, 7 February) is a comedy actioner with postmodernist influences. While a team of assassins return home from a night mission, a fireball burns across the morning sky. The ninja squad (the good, the badass, the beautiful, and the terribly annoying) are attacked by man-eating monsters burrowing underground (obviously borrowing ideas from *Tremors*), but the bizzaro predator/alien hybrid of this AVP spoof doesn't stay buried or hidden for long. Soon our heroes find a whole village slaughtered, and then events alternate between slapstick grotesquery and cartoonish swordplay gore as AVN becomes a kind of *Bad Taste* with Japanese killers. CGI and prosthetics are mixed, but not seamlessly and rarely effectively enough to overcome the lampooning affect of goofy comic book mayhem with any moments of truly disgusting horror. One of the rubber-suited slimy creatures gangsta-sneers at the heroine's breastplate. Forced removal of those mind-controlling parasites (pink blobby toys) goes on so far beyond a joke, almost reaching uncanny absurdity. AVN really doesn't look very promising at first but, thankfully, its effrontery gets progressively sillier, and occasionally inspired, as it develops.



OPERATION: ENDGAME (aka: *Rogues Gallery*), on DVD/Blu-ray from 21 February, is essentially a black comedy with slasher undercurrents about the worst ever day at a basement office. Alpha and omega teams of assassins are codenamed after tarot cards with new bloke Fool (Joe Anderson, *Crazies* remake) as viewpoint character for intro to High Priestess (Maggie Q, TV's new *Nikita*), Chariot (Rob Corddry, *Hot Tub Time Machine*), Judgement (Ving Rhames, British actioner *The Tournament* – also about a conflict between killers), Empress (Ellen Barkin, *Ocean's 13*), and others, gathered in an underground complex where no firearms are allowed. There's a cubicle floor plan, video monitoring by noncombatant overseers, and staff tensions (boasts of prowess/pondering career choice) incite bunker intrigues – including Russian roulette. Fool is reunited with his ex, Temperance (Odette Yustman, *Unborn*), who has a lipstick gun. Computer problem from malware activates escape-proof

lockdown and self-destruct contingency after agency's boss Devil (Jeffrey Tambor, *Hellboy*) is found murdered. It's no surprise that mercenary psychos and moral deadbeats on the opposing squads hate each other so, of course, this feeds directly into ultra-paranoid scenario to result in plenty of audaciously wacky-comic book action in the low-budget crucible of death, where big name stars are killed off rather quickly, while whodunit mystery is shunted into shadows to make way for spook betrayals or violent recrimination. The debutant director, Fouad Mikati, delights in turning desktop equipment – from stapler to paper shredder – into lethal weapons, as civil warfare becomes a place-your-bets showcase on who will be terminated next ("heaven never hints") while a time-bomb countdown cranks up overwrought edginess, set against the political back story of corrupt cowboy 'dubya' Bush administration's whitewash house-cleaning exit strategy during the rise of Obama.



A sequel to Russian sci-fi epic *My iz budushchego* (2008) – ‘we the future’ – **PARADOX SOLDIERS** (aka: *My iz budushchego 2*) is released on DVD, 21 February. It starts with a WW2 battle re-enactment by Muscovite students and other youths – all so culturally westernised, even those playing German troops, that basic set-up for this regrettably hackneyed cross-genre drama seems, at first glance, like prep for exportable comedy, as participants become eager to ‘rewrite’ history by changing the war

game’s strategy and tactics for Ukrainian heroes, but once past introductory stage of undergraduates’ fun, narrative settles down into fairly standard action adventure. I’m sure it would be of some help to have seen the original film, but this follow-up has enough well-placed clues for any fans of *Back to the Future* to easily suss what’s gone before. Mysterious forces released from toppling a forgotten ‘monument’ and CGI fireball from unstable UXB, results in a timewarp for the four men caught inadvertently in a traumatic rift. As POWs in 1944, they’re laughed at for talking about the 21st century, especially the Leningrad/St Petersburg city name reshuffle. The professor/historian provides key intel for his displaced group’s survival in chaotic wartime, when both armies suspect them of being foreign spies (with ballpoint pen and iPhone gadgets). Main story arc becomes clear when transporting

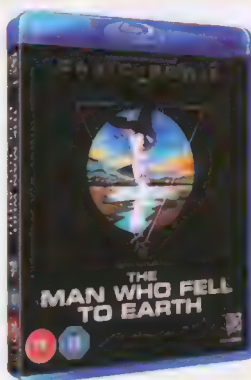
pregnant nurse Nina (plot’s catalytic love interest) away from a Russian army camp. Hunted by pursuing Germans, the young prof and his new pals realise their only hope of getting back to the future lies in recreating the explosion at the same location. Despite its grim scenes of WW2 atrocities, this film’s tragedy is deeply romanticised, almost like Disney schmaltz in its overall sensibility. It’s not solid SF either, and genre content is sketchy at best. Instead, it’s a standard lesson about finding moral courage to overcome fear and adversity, while accepting responsibility to become the hero, or whatever, of your own life story. Although it clearly resembles Richard Donner’s rather lamentable *Timeline* (2003) to an extent, *Paradox Soldiers* only goes back 65 years instead of 650 years, to sacrifice truth on the altar of causality for its martial eastern-front entertainment.



Made in 1986, Richard Wen’s black comedy **VAMP** (DVD/Blu-ray, 21 February) is about wannabe frat boys straying onto the wrong side of town, while hoping to hire a cheap stripper for their ‘pledge party’. They are waylaid by white-haired knife maniac Snow (B-movie

regular Billy Drago, *The Untouchables*), before escaping to a ‘classy’ club, where nominal hero Keith (Chris Makepeace) meets the bubbly blonde waitress (Dedee Pfeiffer) who claims to know him. On stage, Katrina (model and singer Grace Jones, previously seen to good effect in *Conan the Destroyer* and *View to a Kill*), in pallid makeup, two-tone body paint, wearing spiral wire ‘bikini’, and bright red fright wig, does a lurid dance routine which, combined with the actress’ curious androgyny, leaves a question mark over whether her performance actually has any non-fetishistic sex appeal. Keith’s drinking buddy A.J. (Robert Rusler, *Sometimes They Come Back*) is Katrina’s backstage snack, and so college boy becomes a vampire after fang assault. Going home with the waitress, Keith survives danger of seemingly cursed

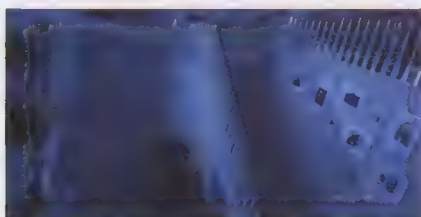
lift doors in the cheap hotel as his awful day turns into a nightmare after dark... Scorsese’s superb surreal drama *After Hours* (1985) was perhaps an inspiration/influence upon social weirdness here, while *Vamp*’s more overtly supernatural action anticipates the strip-club-as-vampire-den scenario of Rodriguez’s great *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1994). In retrospect, *Vamp* is a fairly naff sexploitation thriller, mixing teen comedy with urban horror. It’s noted for it highly unrealistic, very 1980s’ pop video style lighting, all livid purples/acidic greens – even in the sewer/drainage tunnels where toothy fiends lurk before a climactic, scrappily unconvincing meltdown (such grisly special effects were perfected just a year later for Bigelow’s classic *Near Dark*) in the morning’s sunlight.



Courtesy of Optimum we have 3 Blu-rays of **THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH** to give away.

To be entered into the draw simply email your name and postal address to iz233@ttapress.com, using the film title as your subject line.

The closing date is April 11th. Winners will be announced on the forum.



PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 2

(extended cut DVD/Blu-ray, 28 February) is a freeze-dried boil-in-bag prequel to Oren Peli's *Paranormal Activity* (*Black Static* #15). Although it's a better looking film, directed by franchising opportunist Tod Williams (*The Door in the Floor*), once again the blithely witless tedium of its get-rich-quick template for success focusing on unreality-TV shtick of accumulated details without any intrigues. Yes, daily life can be illogical and unnerving but, so what? Jarring

fast-cuts, a lack of pace, intentionally bad handheld camerawork, and the insufferable banality of home-video content, just waiting for something untoward or startling to happen, ensure this is just another new product line. It's humdrum movie-making by numbers, with time and date stamps. On-screen captions warn of impending death, and yet there's still a complete absence of genuine suspense in bringing any frissons of supernatural chaos to a monotony of domestic order. Utterly contrived, dismally self-conscious (in all its attempts to mimic 'improv' dialogue), *PA 2* is awfully disingenuous about voyeuristic aesthetics and so, perhaps, the only actually interesting thing here is how profoundly boring the fake documentary format is when its main purpose is simply avoidance of having to think creatively about plot

and/or characters, while ignoring even the most basic standards of quality in cinema. *PA 2* is effective as terror chiller only in the way it strives, so clumsily, to tap into irrational fears about superstitious nonsense pasted over a homicide and missing persons case. Obviously, an eager audience for this sort of material exists, just as there are viewers out there keen on Internet video-diary, or weirdoes' webcam streams; and tweet-maniacs are happy to help PR gonks market it for free. I suppose there might be good mileage in a 'how-to' featurette ('Paranormal Gloating?') about this profitable video industry phenomenon – but, for me, it's never even remotely entertaining. 'Paranormal Activity 3' (also from Williams) is reportedly in pre-production. I've got no idea why... Oh, yeah: ka-ching!



Ozploitation shocker **PRIMAL** (DVD/Blu-ray, 28 February) starts with a 12,000-years-ago prologue in which an aboriginal caveman is killed by a humanoid savage, then we jump to present day, where a carload of kids are on a camping hike to study rock painting on that ancient site of death. Tagged early on as a 'final girl' candidate, claustrophobe Anja (Zoe Tuckwell-Smith) has a panic attack in the caves where 'something' horrible is lurking,

and a "Don't be ridiculous, it's perfectly safe" line trades upon genre movie lore so it's clear that, although this isn't outright comedy, we shouldn't take whatever happens afterwards too seriously. There are genuine witticisms here, with good fun to be found in stereotype characters being cast against norm, so Wil Traval – the obvious choice for a sporting 'jock' – is chosen to play anthropology student Dace. Blonde Mel (Krew Boylan) takes a nude swim

("How does that affect my dignity?"), getting leeches all over her body, and she's first to be infected with a homicidal blood lust ("some sort of episode") that causes her regression to super-agile cannibal primitivism as "sabre-tooth girlfriend". Director Josh Reed sticks loyally to subgenre formula as the group's immersion in an ancient murder-mystery involves their unwitting intrusion upon the hunting beastie's territory, which is seemingly protected by mutation-inducing virus. Drawing straws to pick who must kill the next person infected cranks up the tension, before yet more terror and some disgustingly gruesome special effects. Eventually, of course, Anja becomes the heroine as last uninfected survivor, adapting to fight/flight dilemma with the bloodied machete in one hand, and a flaming torch in the other, for showdown with a vile CGI-creature hiding in the remote cave. "That was intense!"

A good spoof movie with effective genre parody is very hard to get right, more so when attempting to mimic the clunky low-rent filmmaking of yesteryear where phrases like “scientifically impossible” are used while nonsense that would shame an outrageously improbable fantasy is tolerated without a second thought. Larry Blamire’s **THE LOST SKELETON OF CADAVRA** (DVD, 7 March) quite intentionally frames something that is not just bad in style and technically incompetent but truly awful on every level except dumb absurdity. It’s numbingly pedantic in wooden caricaturing and exaggeration of schlock 1950s B-movies, with stock characters and cheesy scenarios, which exploited then prevalent subgenre trends for tacky monsters and/or alien invaders/visitors, in such tripe as *Robot Monster*, *Devil Girl From Mars*, *Man From Planet X*, *Plan 9 From Outer Space*,

etc. With forced laughter at charmless tomfoolery, which is trying to recreate something from a bygone age but merely tries viewers’ patience, this fails miserably, without irony or genuine wit, due to its unimaginative skiffy regurgitation of crude inanities all shot flatly in cheerless b&w. Dr Armstrong (the director himself) searches for a ‘meteor’ made of rare and powerful substance ‘atmosphereum’, while a couple of aliens from the planet Marva arrive on Earth, to act baffled and bemused by all things human. Fay Masterson struggles to bring straitlaced humanity to questing scientist Armstrong’s cardboard wife Betty. Blamire’s real wife Jennifer is panto cat-girl Animala... “Seriously, I don’t know if I can do science with you dancing like that,” he tells her. (And that’s as funny as it gets!) This is the kind of stupid movie that sci-fi fans might talk about – perhaps during amiable chat down the pub? – making one

day, but would soon realise how childish the idea is when they sober up. Comedy sci-fi like this works fairly well in TV sketches and music videos or as cinephile homage in short films, like cult-worthy satire *La menace vient de l’espace* (I strongly recommend the ‘colourised 1991 version’ of that “first French SF picture”), and certainly for such hit-and-miss anthology features like obviously campy flimflam *Amazon Women on the Moon* (1987). Sadly, *Lost Skeleton...* is a movie about an alien named Kro-Bar. Worse still, adventures of Blamire’s Dr Armstrong and chums continue in *The Lost Skeleton Returns Again* (2009). When the peculiar old movies and their subject material being ridiculed here is actually more – unintentionally – entertaining (with all its charming ineptitude, *Devil Girl From Mars* remains quite amusing!) than this pathetic copycat, ‘why bother?’ is not an unfair question to ask its makers.



The Right Stuff confronted the myth of “a demon that lived in the air” warning us that “whoever challenged him would die!” The first feature directed by comic book writer-artist Kaare Andrews, **ALTITUDE** (DVD/Blu-ray, 14 March), concerns novice pilot Sara (Jessica Lowndes, *Autopsy*) and a mixed quartet of her friends, on a twin-engine light plane, on their way to a concert. Following an uncontrolled climb to 10,000 feet, they encounter inky clouds in daytime, lose all radio contact, and faulty instruments make navigation just guesswork. A bolt’s jiggled free to break something. Now ice forms on the wings. Yes, it’s yet another teens ‘stuck in...’ movie: trapped inside a plane’s cabin, with no way to land safely. There’s a long history of aviation horror dating back, most notably, to an overanxious passenger (William Shatner) in the *Nightmare at 20,000 Feet* episode from *The Twilight Zone* (1963) – remade to even better effect by George Miller for the last segment (with John Lithgow) of *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983). Here though, sabotage by gremlins is replaced with a Lovecraftian monster in the sky, a giant flying squid which “makes more sense than anything else” because it’s created by the overactive imagination of the nerdy kid’s ‘Weird Stories’ comic book that comes ludicrously true in midair. Bad overacting for some wholly unsympathetic characters, lots of panicky shouting, nuisance antics by the bullying drunken jock, family secrets – to be revealed as supposedly clever plot twists – and a largely off-screen menace, that is much like the invisible demon of TV movie *Horror at 37,000 Feet* (1973), combine to make *Altitude* an airborne dilemma drama that’s far less than the sum of its mixed genre conceits.

History channel’s 47-minute special episode of science TV series **THE UNIVERSE: 7 WONDERS OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM** (Blu-ray, 21 March), written and directed by Laura Verklan, is clearly aimed at young audiences. Its cheesy gee-whiz narration for cheap sketchy CGI and list countdown format for a whistle stop 3D Solar tour charted by a spacecraft benefits from the latest data, new images provided by observatories and recent probes like *Cassini*, but its junior educational style with nerdy guys grinning/gushing means it lacks a watchable commentary. From those “gargantuan geysers” of Saturn’s moon Enceladus, and an asteroid belt voyage (we’re informed that – shock horror! – Hollywood blockbusters have never accurately shown us what space travel through this cosmic debris might actually look like), to Olympus Mons – largest volcano on Mars blah blah – via the 400-year-old “mother of all storms” of Jupiter’s chronic red spot, and Saturnian rings (where embedded moonlets sculpt ‘mountains’ from icy dust), our journey skips inwards to “sizzling surface of the Sun!” offering photosphere galleries with coronal mass animations courtesy of SOHO. Yes, of course, number one spot is occupied by the Earth – only inhabited planet and “just a great place” yet scientists are still uncertain whether any genuinely intelligent life exists here... Perhaps other episodes of *The Universe* might suggest more likely systems to find rationally enlightened sentient wisdom?



Aerial assault of a grander variety marks the spectacular highlight of indie production **SKYLINE** (DVD/Blu-ray, 21 March). Directed by brothers Colin and Greg Strause, this begins as *Cloverfield* meets *Independence Day*, concentrating on the fates of ordinary people, and their reactions to alien conquest, so there's plenty of widescreen spectacle in disaster movie mode, but a lack of Hollywood resources means it's forced to ignore typical blockbuster upscale framing for a 'big picture' of global events (until a closing montage). It's exemplary as modern weird sci-fi B-movie template, with a pre-credits teaser sequence, before it rewinds to the day before, as Jarrod (Eric Balfour, *Lie With Me*) and his pregnant girlfriend Elaine (Scottie Thompson, TV series *Trauma*) arrive in Los Angeles, staying with friends after a showbiz birthday party. They're woken up just before dawn by intense light from outside a marina condo, finding L.A. is mostly dead calm in the morning with news media off-line. Searching their observation deck residential block after the first eerie sightings, they see UFOs emitting hypnotic rays – causing temporary bruise-burns – as gigantic ships descend from cloud cover. A hasty retreat indoors saves lives after seeing huge machinery vacuuming people up into the air "like a goddamn rapture". Ejecting the warp core of an SF epic structure, *Skyline* sidesteps having to bother with generic portrayal of political responses to this menace from outer space,

or international defence/military efforts to counter invasion forces' strategy. Putting cult comic book styled horrors back into a subgenre culture, here we have city-stomping monsters hunting humans, while airborne mecha squid scouts are launched from hovering alien base-ships, to roam around and probe inside buildings. Even when military help turns up belatedly, in the form of marine snipers and USAF drone bombers, the nuked mothership survives to rebuild itself, and its entourage of squid-bots salvage their own, with a leave-no-tentacle-behind policy. Injured Jarrod is either infected or mutated, the villains' purpose/intention is revealed as simplistic brain-harvesting, but *Skyline*'s tremendous fun as briskly impressive sci-fi terror. It's not great like the bug-eyed creatures of *Starship Troopers* were great in providing so many gruesome shock scenes, nor does it match the savagely downbeat effectiveness of *District 13* for sheer imaginative verve – with an edgy protagonist and compelling satirical exhilaration. However, *Skyline* does fulfil the promise of its arresting poster artwork, offering far better pulp SF entertainment, overall, than Spielberg's woefully inadequate *War of the Worlds* remake, especially when the Strauses quite daringly deliver mankind from knowingly easy salvation with an engagingly witty genre-twist conclusion (for Jarrod and Elaine, trapped inside the icky-Borg variant 'assimilation chamber'), which cribs its switcheroo surprise from *Scanners*.



Watchable mystery thriller **THE GATHERING** (2002) has a re-release on DVD from 28 March. This surprisingly intriguing British chiller was penned by TV writer Anthony Horowitz, creator of clunky 1990s' sci-fi series *Crime Traveller* and *Vanishing Man*, and the schoolboy spy adventure *Stormbreaker*. American abroad Cassie (Christina Ricci, *After Life*, *Speed Racer*, *Black Snake Moan*) is knocked down by driver Marion (Kerry Fox, *Shallow Grave*, *Intimacy*), but survives with only scratches and amnesia. Elsewhere in the West Country, the newly discovered ruins of an ancient church are surveyed by forensic archaeologist Simon Kirkman (Stephen Dillane, Merlin in *King Arthur*), Marion's husband, obviously fascinated by a 'first century' depiction of the crucifixion (found in the subterranean church) which might well have been sculpted an eyewitness. Cassie is taken in by the kindly Kirkmans, becoming their nanny, with a special attachment to asthmatic young son Michael. As the rural town prepares for summer fair rituals, Cassie starts having disturbing visions of gore and death scenes, and she meets mystery man Dan (Ioan Gruffudd, TV's *Hornblower*, Lancelot in *King Arthur*, stretchy in *Fantastic 4*), but finds some of local folks are *Wicker Man* weird; none creepier than mechanic/gunman Argyle (Peter McNamara, *The Bill*): "Nothing was ever proved, but..." Simon's research of the bas-relief portraits on buried church walls matches faces to various spectators at famous tragedies/homicides – including JFK's assassination – cranking up suspenseful plot development until puzzling secrets of *The Gathering* unfold with a climactic killing spree. Its primary genre forerunners are fairly easy to identify: Ray Bradbury's *The Crowd* (1943), adapted for TV in 1985, plus Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore's novella 'Vintage Season' (1946), well filmed as *Timescape* (1992). Although Horowitz's scripting has many gaffes or glitches in hazy logic of its sprawling story arc, director Brian Gilbert (*Wilde*, *Vice Versa*) maintains a healthy measure of appealing tension throughout, even if this production lacks the tight editing and slickness common to other similarly doom laden movies. Gilbert's *Gathering* is good but it's not as accomplished a supernatural movie as *The Reaping* (2007).

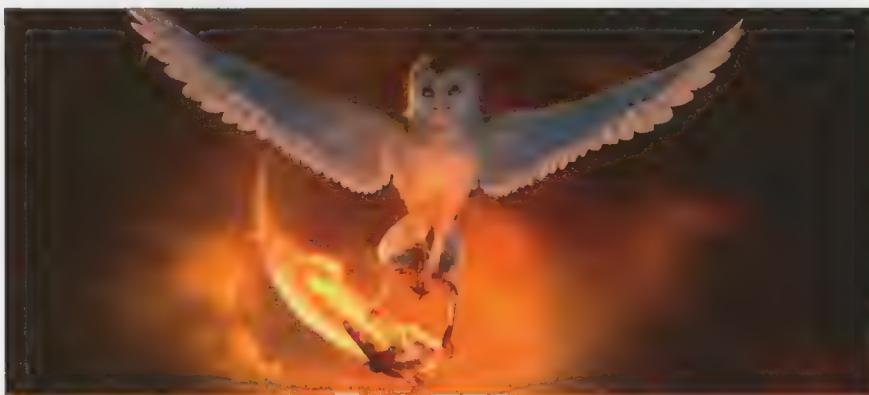


An aspect of **THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH** (Blu-ray, 4 April) that has always both intrigued and irritated me is the movie's lack of any interplanetary spacecraft for the alien visitor's crossing to Earth. Does Thomas Jerome Newton (David Bowie) 'fall' just like Kal-El arrived here from Krypton? Where's the wreckage of his landing pod? Walter Tevis' short novel dates from 1963 but, even in the late 1970s' revised version (with a 1985–90 timeline) there's no description of any space vehicle. So perhaps the lack of such tech details in the book prompted the filmmakers to simply use available footage of an Apollo rocket launch as stand-in for sci-fi cinema's typical miniatures or props, and it's only the splashdown in a lake which is original material here. It's quite fascinating to consider how much this 'new wave' SF picture, about a lone stranger in a bland yet hostile land, benefits from the absence of obvious ET hardware. Here, we have a vision of space travel without any hint of cheesy 'flying saucers', and it offers a strangely arty presentation of journeying to Earth, with just a mere allusion to starry trekking, which ensures that it's the film's darkly affecting meditations on alienation, decadent ennui and alcoholism that compels attention. Roeg and screenwriter Paul Mayersberg (who directed his own 1988 adaptation of Asimov's *Nightfall*) favour a resolutely non-trad approach to SF cinema which has proven as remarkably atypical and iconic, in its own way, as Kubrick's *2001* or Boorman's *Zardoz*.

Reflecting upon the myths of Icarus and Adam for a modern epic about 'descent' – in contrast to that Clarkean ascension's allegorising of Nietzsche's Zarathustra and Homer's Odysseus, while Baum's eccentric dream quests combined with baroque tragedies for *Zardoz*'s post-holocaust immortality fable – *The Man Who Fell to Earth* has challenged many critical assumptions of what SF cinema was capable of, back then, even as it denies a basic wish-fulfilment of most sci-fi fans' expectations for escapist adventure. Newton has flashbacks almost as if he's suffering time-slips: to leaving behind his alien family – dressed in recycling survival suits (which anticipate *Dune*) – as his wife and children mime farewell to a father/explorer leaving on a monorail 'train'. On Earth, Newton is just as emotionally and physically fragile (conking out in a lift, his effeminate body is light enough for Candy Clark's doltish but comely drunk Mary-Lou to carry) just as in Tevis' story. Newton's earthbound lifestyle is, similarly, not secret, but paradoxically essentially private and mostly withdrawn. It's his repetitive failures to acclimatise, to understand human nature, and communicate clearly that prompt his defeat and ruin. Unlike the book (where he enjoys reading), here Newton's psyche absorbs television as direct experience and, feeling his mind endangered, he becomes far more reclusive and eccentric as time passes, eventually forced to abandon World Enterprises' grand space project. Why plan to return, when his 'home' has no water or

grass or money or booze? It's a mesmerising SF narrative, but one quite bereft of lightshow spectacle (as in Spielberg's *CE3K*) or practically omnipotent robots (*Day the Earth Stood Still*, in either version). There are techie gadgets (Newton's innovative patents, of course) with a shiny modernity, much wallowing in explicit decadence, and in generally surrealist weirdness – including 'alien' sex frolics in milk which remain sensationally suggestive. It's all the baggage of sexuality that's added to Tevis' science fiction which grants this decidedly odd film version a wholly different cultural aesthetic. As mysterious visitor, Newton is offering second chances to waywardly complacent earthlings, but unlike in the book, patents' lawyer Farnsworth (Buck Henry, *Heaven Can Wait*) is openly gay, and former chemistry teacher Dr Bryce (Rip Torn, *Men in Black*) endures a mid-life crisis that means losing interest in bedding college girls. With a greater hysteria about celebrity and paranoia affecting moral decisions of powers-that-be than was apparent in the book, curious incongruities (such as the limo driving through a desert) abound. Contemplative rather than confrontational in its 'first contact' scenario, Roeg's rather bleak masterpiece (as much as I liked/admire his later *Insignificance*, and found *The Witches* to be delightfully grotesque fun, nothing Roeg has done since comes close to equalling the impact of this enthralling tragedy) appeals as a singularly fine example of alien anomie, although decades of changes to varied signature themes of visual sci-fi have shifted away towards more easily classifiable content of what passes routinely for genre movies today. *The Man Who Fell to Earth* was remade for TV in 1987, but by then it was simply too late... John Carpenter's superb road movie *Starman* (1984) had already stolen any leftover/unexplored possibilities for a specific quirkiness and eerie otherness, with its own enchantingly messianic storyline of interstellar tourism. In terms of new wave SF cinema, perhaps only that Argentinean psych-ward drama *Man Facing Southeast* (aka: *Hombre mirando al sudeste*, 1986), belatedly remade by Hollywood as *K-PAX* (2001), manages to strike a similar balance of exquisite allegory with insightful genre-SF concerns.

In addition to *Watching the Alien* documentary, and other previously released DVD extras, this 35th anniversary hi-def edition includes new interviews with screenwriter Paul Mayersberg and actress Candy Clark.



After *300* and *Watchmen*, director Zack Snyder moves away from genre blockbuster pathways to children's fantasy with CGI bird fest **LEGEND OF THE GUARDIANS: THE OWLS OF GA'HOOLE** (DVD/Blu-ray, 11 April).

Is this a career nosedive? Damned by a corny plotline that's part Tolkien, partly reminiscent of that rabbits movie, this

plays like 'Watership Sky', a fabulous visual creation of 3D animation keen to please viewers too young to see that sci-fi event about blue monkeys. Here's a feathered variety, with the bildungsroman adventures of lost boy owlets, falling out of the nested tree house to be kidnapped/enslaved in gloomy caves of an evil white queen, before their sibling rivalry splits them

apart, leaving winged brothers on opposite sides of aerial wars that approximates an avian *Matrix* for trainee birds of prey. It's a grab-bag mix of sundry themes and narrative elements: a questing journey for honest proles seeking the help of mythic heroes to defeat a corrupt elite, rebellion by despotic schemers, metaphors on ethnic cleansing/racial purity with metal-head Woundwort raising a conscripted army for airspace conquest – using magnetic force weaponry, ninja bats, and shock 'n' awe of a forest fire. As expensively filmed fairy tale, *Legend of the Guardians* is just a middling story with cringingly comic relief asides, amidst magical wonders of anime-styled big eyes, beaks and talons, po-faced mayhem and politically muddled ideology, so abominably trite it's a polished turd of anthropomorphism that's grotesquely crass and ultimately tiresome, unless you are five or six years old. "But what do I know, I'm just a tired old screech."



Invisible guardians watch over dreamers in quiet suburbia and protect them against nocturnal fiends. A little girl's overactive imagination somehow breaches dimensional gap between realities. Beginning like *Wings of Desire* mixed with *Nightmare on Elm Street*, Jamin Winans' indie actioner **INK** (DVD/Blu-ray, 25 April) puts young Emma (Quinn Hunchar) in danger from a beak-nosed monster-man wearing a ragged cloak/ghillie suit. A kung fu domestic rumble between a female martial artist and the night stalker ensues but, despite other 'superhuman' defenders joining the fray, the kidnap of Emma cannot be prevented. Her spirit is snatched from own bedroom, leaving her physical

form in a coma. Previously separated from her dad John (Chris Kelly), since he lost a custody battle, Emma doesn't expect to be saved by him while he's trying to carry on regardless as busy exec stockbroker, still frustrated by guilt and anger over his negligent past. While Emma is hauled off down the infinite dreamscape corridor, that's lined with teleport portals, a motley team of those do-gooders/fighting heroes assembles to find a solution to this family crisis and, apparently, save Emma's soul... Made in 2009, *Ink* reportedly suffered many problems finding a distributor, and it's not hard to see why. The uncanny mood of this production with acute visual stylings means it's more like an

arty video project than a proper genre narrative. Inspired by *The Matrix* and *Dark City*, it's almost an Americanised take on Russian epics *Night Watch/Day Watch*, yet with obvious thematic nods to *Wizard of Oz* misadventure, and episodic *Time Bandits*. It's very interesting to look at but not actually very good or involving as supernatural drama, with fantasy combatants struggling against evils of incubus menaces. It aims to be a fable about parental responsibility and obligation but fails to always distinguish, visually, between its weird sleepwalking realm and the 'real world' events. Blurring those fiction/fantasy boundaries of imagination is not a serious problem yet it does greatly weaken overall impact of storytelling coherence in this peculiar case by generating needless confusions. Did the filmmakers lack certain confidence in their ability to present the plot's basic soap opera backstory and John's empty/soulless office job without jazzing it up so much? The best urban sequence is an orchestrated series of coincidences, wrought by the blind tick-tock man, resulting in a car accident which puts neglectful dad John in the same hospital as his comatose daughter. Can poor Emma be saved from dunking/drowning in the symbolic bathtub of ultimate/tragic despair? *Ink* is worth seeing but don't get too excited about it. For something that's vaguely similar, but more coherent and genuinely entertaining from start to finish, see British movie *Franklyn* (*Interzone* #223).

MUTANT POPCORN

NICK LOWE

NEVER LET ME GO

•
I AM NUMBER FOUR•
PAUL•
THE GREEN HORNET•
GULLIVER'S TRAVELS•
ARTHUR AND THE GREAT
ADVENTURE•
HEREAFTER•
SEASON OF THE WITCH•
DRIVE ANGRY

Mark Romanek has had a circuitous career. In 1986 he made a little sf indie, *Static*, which kicked open no doors whatever in Hollywood but became a modest cult hit in the UK. One of the people who thought it was cool was sf scion Robyn Hitchcock, who engaged Romanek to direct a couple of videos that in turn landed him a contract with Propaganda Films, the interstellar mothership of music video, where he

would blossom as one of the all-time masters of the form. A wilfully low-key second feature, the Robin Williams creeper *One Hour Photo*, finally happened in 2002, but since then nothing until now, and the fascinating exercise in unfilmability that is **NEVER LET ME GO**.

Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 novel isn't really like anything else. Purely in terms of the genre cladistics it so artfully



A slightly too cosy relationship between novel and screenwriters is also one of the problems with **I AM NUMBER FOUR**, hastily made for Michael Bay from the first (and to date only) volume of a projected sextet under the "Pittacus Lore" prosoponym, about teenage undercover aliens hunted by interstellar death squads with a hitlist that has to be followed in strict numerical order or (as handwavingly

explained in the novel, but left wisely unaddressed in the film) their heads will like explode or something. Stakes are raised further by the fact that the Loriens (sic) not only acquire embarrassing powers at puberty, here exemplified by a particularly naff lighty-hands thing activated by stressful high-school situations, but fall head-over-heels in alien love with the nearest available chick out of *Glee*. ("We don't love like the humans. With us, it's forever.") If all this sounds like a lazy mashup of *Roswell* and *Smallville*, that's pretty much what it is— which is presumably why the manuscript was handed to *Smallville* showrunners Alfred Gough and Miles Millar to adapt in the first place, and why a further TV veteran (*Buffy*'s Marti Noxon) was brought in for the final buff-up after another, uncredited writer came and went. Dreamworks picked up the series rights on the basis of an unfinished first draft of the first volume, which was then itself significantly rewritten as the screenplay developed in parallel. This kind of thing happens more and more, of course, with the film sometimes turning out better than the source (*Kick-Ass*, *The Social Network*), sometimes less

resists, it's an alternate-history tale of a world transformed in the early 1950s by breakthroughs in organ transplantation and human cloning that remain science-fictional in our own present, but which curiously lacks the ability to clone individual organs, resulting in an entire caste of cloned underpeople raised solely for the purpose of organ donation in a drastically abbreviated adulthood. For anyone with even minimal training in sf reasoning, this scenario is patently ridiculous on pretty much every level you care to think it through; but the novel does a bravura job of keeping obvious questions at bay by viewing its world through the compellingly narrowed consciousness of a first-person narrator untouched by the idea that things could ever be otherwise. The challenge for the screen version has been to find a way to persuade audiences to accept that acceptance in defiance of the relentless objectivity of film.

In tune with the novel, Romanek's first cut didn't include the opening text explaining it was sf. The initial titles were reluctantly added only after test audiences in the US were outraged at what they took to be a savage exposé of a sixty-year programme of factory-farming human

clones to feed the UK population's appetite for organs. Alex Garland, a good friend of the author who was close to the novel during its writing, did the adaptation on a personal handshake deal, and the result is something of an object lesson in the inadvisability of letting your mates adapt your book. Garland has completely bought Ishiguro's impatience with the question "Why don't they just run away?", and the stock response that this is a Hollywood trope and in real life people don't. But it just won't wash, because the novel is all about Tommy and Kathy's attempt to do just that, to find a loophole that will allow them to postpone their fate. When their plan fails at the first hurdle, they improbably give up even trying; but while it may be true that people don't run away from a lot of things, if you're living in a first-world country where you're supposed to die in your twenties so that the overclass can live past a hundred, you'd Logan up like a shot. Once you actually see Kathy's world on screen with its total absence of fences, the story becomes unsustainable.

Nobody could say it's not beautifully made. The production design and locations brilliantly recreate the novel's dank and dingy period world of schools, farms, and

provincial hospitals in the dilapidated margins of England that seem permanently a generation behind the actual times. Carey Mulligan, a fan of the book in her own teens, is about as good as you could ever imagine anyone being in anything, delivering a pitch-perfect Kathy across an almost unplayable range from mid-teens to late twenties, and the rest of a high-value cast have their work cut out to keep up. It's particularly brave of Keira Knightley, a quite different kind of actress with a largely incompatible range, to go up against her without the armament of 100,000 words of intensely realised first-person underskinning; and not surprising that she struggles to compete, falling back into that fish-mouth thing she does when she doesn't really have a character down. But as an intimate fable of innocence and experience in a world sustained by shocking inequalities and injustices that nobody likes to think about too much, the Romanek-Garland version catches something of what has cursed the novel's own short existence with the status of an emerging school-syllabus staple. My eldest read it in year 9, and hated it with a vehemence. The film seems just as likely to deliver that.

happily (*Repo Men*), and in extreme cases (*The Lovely Bones*) sending the film back to the drawing board when the finished text turned out not quite to be what the rightsholder thought she'd purchased. So it's not clear at what point Dreamworks realised they had a bit of a problem on their hands, and that though the novel has been marketed and sold well it's frankly a lemon, as unremittingly dreadful as you'd expect from a pair of Hollywood insiders drawn to the sf machinery entirely as a tool for engineering factory-standard post-*Twilight* teen fiction out of recombinant genre tropes. Nobody seems in the least interested in the astrophysical or exobiological underpinnings, and in one delightful passage of alien-genius technopatter the authors don't even seem to understand how the internet works. Pittacus Lore himself, though entirely unmentioned in the film, is the name of a mysteriously vanished alien elder, but as the first two novels have different first-person narrators it's unclear whether this is going anywhere clever; and it's hard to see much promise of the six-film franchise Dreamworks fondly thought they were getting.



A more fannish take on the same plot comes in eager-to-please British hopeful **PAUL**, which sees geek tourists Simon Pegg and Nick Frost hook up with Seth Rogen's potty-mouthed Grey on the run from men in black who want to scoop out his brains for nefarious government stem cell research. Paul himself is a solid enough concept and character: a crashed alien held by the government since 1947 and long since fluent in profane English and American popular culture after sixty years advising Hollywood as well as the government. The weakness is Pegg and Frost, whose characters and script alike have significant problems that wouldn't have got through if they were still working with Edgar Wright. The plotting is scrappy, the jokes uneven, the American characters' dialogue especially stilted, and the huge number of genre in-quotes more

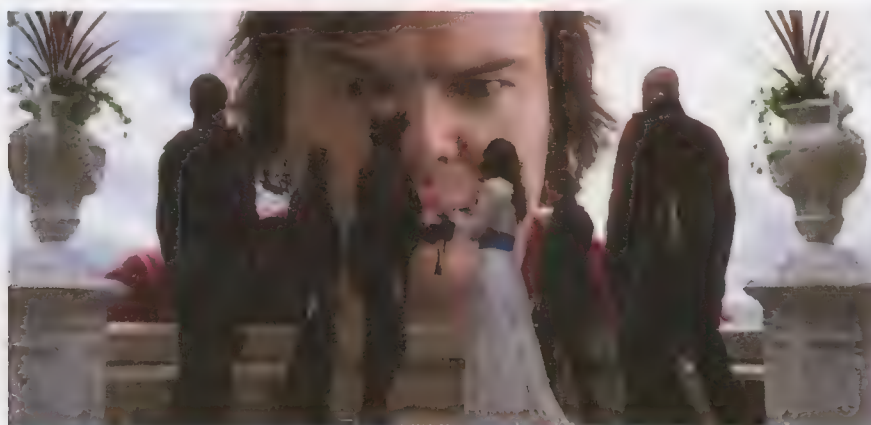
often forced than funny. Above all, for a film by self-professed sf nerds it shows an insultingly outsiderly grasp of actual sf culture and behaviour. Frost's character is an sf writer who has won something you hear the first time as a Nebula (but appears when later referenced to be a "Nebulon") for some spiral-bound A4 toss about a three-boobed green alien chick, and who only gets laid with furies in Ewok outfits at conventions. Neither he nor illustrator BFF Pegg seems actually to read sf, their references being limited to sf media, though needless to say both are ardent UFO enthusiasts (aren't we all?) whose idea of a pilgrimage is to start at Comic-Con and then drive the alien highway from Area 51 and the Black Mailbox via Camp Verde and Apache Junction to Roswell. At no point is there any suggestion that a love of sf, or the bonding that comes from it, could be anything but the unrequited desire of paunchy middle-aged male no-lives for something exclusively American. There's some quite edgy pro-science satire on fundamentalism, and one or two of the movie in-jokes raise a modest smile; but the script needed several more passes than Working Title seems to have been able to afford.



Letting the stars write themselves has done no better favours to **THE GREEN HORNET**, in which Rogen's terrestrial form rides in to rescue a foundering attempt at recuperating the most comprehensively rubbish of all superheroes. Conceived in, by, and for the lost world of 1930s radio, the Hornet has lurched lamely from one short-lived incarnation to another, reaching an apex

of sorts in the single-season 1966 TV show that gave Bruce Lee to the world, and sputtering on half-heartedly in occasional abortive comics runs since, including a recent stint by Kevin Smith. His costume, powers, and whole *modus operandi* were so feeble, and dated so rapidly, that the character's survival has been sustained more by intellectual-property wrangling of a vague intergenerational nostalgia

than by anything remotely interesting in the character and concept. Predictably, the Rogen version of this long-developed revival spends a good bit of its dialogue time optimistically pitching the film to itself: "What is the most insanely stupid thing all superheroes have in common? *Everyone knows they're the good guys.* That's what we'll do different ... When they make it into a movie, I would see the shit out of it!" In fairness, Rogen and his co-writer do have one interesting insight into the distinctiveness of the property: that the Hornet is the one superhero duo where the sidekick is cooler than the lead, and that this can be the vehicle for some interesting duo dynamics, though in the event the Hornet/Kato relationship takes over the film in a peculiar way that seems to involve recording over huge stretches of the plot with indulgent character scenes, and squeezing what's left into tiny marginal spaces of dialogue and montage. The considerable upside is that it's quite wonderfully directed, with the ever-bonkers Michel Gondry enjoying his biggest budget ever and a 3D conversion on top. He's wasted, but then so would be anyone else.



GULLIVER'S TRAVELS brands itself as a 21st-century reboot of Swift's narrative of the Lilliput-Blefuscu wars, but is actually one of those interestingly conflicted American films about class and mobility, with the Brit-accented Lilliputians learning about aspiration and breaking porcelain ceilings while Jack Black's Gulliver in his turn learns that plagiarising Fox's in-house roster of biggest media properties (*Star Wars*, *Titanic*, *X-Men*, *24*, *Avatar*) is not the way to big yourself up. Like *Hornet*, it often seems like a series of scenes pulled up on a corkboard, shuffled, and assembled with the most minimal narrative paperclips, as Jason Segel's pursuit of Princess Emily

Blunt across forbidden boundaries of class finds itself mirroring Gulliver's own pursuit of Amanda Peet when he's just the mailroom guy and she's the travel editor. Given that Gulliver's initiating offence is to plagiarise his own journalistic copy from online sources, it's a touch ironic that the end credits cut and paste chunks of text from a range of copyright-free sources on Swift as movie lorem ipsum, apparently not extending to a reading of the text itself. No doubt the big folks have people to do that for them, notwithstanding the newly embiggened hero's parting message that "There's no small jobs, just small people." Still with the big tales, eh, Jack?

It's little, big all over again as the Drink Me is passed around like lemonade in **ARTHUR AND THE GREAT ADVENTURE**. It's not often that you find yourself thinking that the film you're watching would actually have benefited from a 3D retro-conversion, but so it is with the mad digital stunts and aerial insect action of Luc Besson's brace of *Arthur and the Minimoys* sequels, here cut together into a single feature for international release. Freddie Highmore, who must have banked his performance a good couple of years back, gets a bit more live-action screentime now that the steampunk minibeast microworld in his garden starts to invade the full-sized world, as Lou Reed's tyrannical Malthazard (revoicecast from David Bowie's greatly superior original turn) reverses the shrinking procedure and escapes to visit mayhem on a curious mid-Atlantic version of smalltown New England that, like the plotting, seems to have been imperfectly translated into French and out again. But Besson's normally sure-handed grip on narrative and pacing seems to have lost its grip here, and the whole very expensive folly outstays its welcome by a good half-hour. The surprising thing is that it could ever have been two films in the first place.



Clint Eastwood's afterlife fantasy **HEREAFTER** offers us a trilogy in one volume, dusting off an ambitious but badly flawed Peter Morgan script to tell a globe-spanning tale of three converging encounters with the beyond and the resulting havoc played with credibilities and careers. In Chicago, Matt Damon is a reluctant medium cursed with the filmically priceless gift of sensing characters' deepest backstory at a touch; in Thailand and Paris, telejournalist Cécile de France finds her life spun in a different direction by a near-death experience in the 2004 tsunami; and in London the twin sons of a junkie mum are sent on different

tracks by a tragedy and its aftermath. These intercut stories are braided, and ultimately drawn, together by an awareness of the reality of life after death and (the most interesting element) the barriers this conviction creates between them and the outer world of sceptics and scammers alike. The film is at its most interesting when exploring the difficult borderline between what real psychic experience might be like and its variously delusive or delusory simulations, though its frankness on the matter is one of the things that makes acquiescence in its premise so ultimately resistible. Thus Damon's reluctant psychic consultations look exactly like textbook

cold reading, save for the cinematic flashes of supernatural imagery to assure us they're real; while some of the most effective and unsettling sequences follow a child's attempt to negotiate the web of eschatological fundamentalisms and fraudsters unaided. But in the end there's a softness of head, and a tolerance of warm, fuzzy, non-denominational new-age images of the *au-delà* as a place where there's a lot of ambient light and gel on the lens, and the only things you can say for certain sound exactly like vacuous movie platitudes; while de France's hard-headed journalistic investigations into the "Conspiracy of Silence" are forced to tiptoe deftly around the now fairly generally-accepted neuroscience behind the universal features of NDEs. Almost inevitably, there isn't much of an ending, other than all three characters' finding resolutions to their individual life crises; Damon's character is especially thinly developed, with a Dickens obsession that seems justified more by the needs of the plot than by anything about his life or personality, or indeed Dickens. But like Conan Doyle's *The Land of Mist*, it's a brave detour by a writer of reputation into the credibility-immolating world of the irredeemably flaky; and it's hard not to feel some warmth towards an Eastwood film that sets its big finale at a book fair in Alexandra Palace. The ladies behind me were in this bit, and got terribly excited when it rolled around; the rest they just sighed through noisily.



Hereafter is in large part a reflection on how career-destroying it can be to write a script about the afterlife, and clearly needed the Eastwood name to get itself made at all. But there's one unique star brand that can be relied on consistently to seek out truly bizarre vehicles you can't quite believe got made even when you see them. The latest pair of Nicolas Cage films to make you doubt your own reality are **SEASON OF THE WITCH** and **DRIVE ANGRY**, either one of which would easily be the weirdest thing of its season if it wasn't for the other. In the former, Crusade veterans turned belated conscientious deserters Cage and Ron Perlman are charged by a plaguesmitten Christopher Lee (who literally doesn't have to get out of bed to deliver his cameo) with transporting Claire Foy in a cage through the forest of Pythonesque menace to stand trial and... well, here's Sir Chris's impressively compact

logline: "The witch must be taken to the monastery of Savergnac, where the monks possess the last copy of an ancient book which will destroy the witch and end the plague." A snappy prologue has shown us that in this film witches are real and spectacular; but is Foy the real thing, or an innocent falsely accused, or the victim or agent of something different and darker again? "She sees the weakness that lies in our hearts," says one ill-fated accuser, "and what she sees there she will use against us." For most of the film you think it's just going to be the lazy twist that one of the rest of the party will turn out to be the real witch, but Satan turns out to be playing a different game, if not necessarily a more interesting, leading to a suitably mad finale involving zombie monks ("They're like cockroaches!") and a rather dodgy Harryhausen-homage demon. ("We're going to need more holy water.") *Solomon*

Kane did most of this better, but that was never the point. This is Nicolas Cage, and his laws are not our own.

Drive Angry is even wackier, a deranged Satanic remix of *The Dukes of Hazzard* played backwards to the groove of *Death Proof* in gasoline-fuelled 3D tribute to the golden age of 70s drive-in exploitation cinema. Cage's "John Milton" (evidently not that one) busts out of Hell to confront the cult leader who decapitated our hero's estranged daughter for biting his todger off, keeps her femur as a souvenir walking-stick, and now purposes to trigger the apocalypse by sacrificing her infant child. ("I'm going to beat you to death with all that's left of your daughter – the daughter who hated you!") In a rampage across the south he hitches up with Amber Heard's trailer-trash madonna, plays cat & mouse with William Fichtner as a supercool badass satanic accountant, and wields

a stolen Satanic superweapon that fires God-killing bullets inscribed *Deus Velox Nex*, Latin apparently being no more an inflected language in the dialect of Hell than it is in Google. (In a similar vein the Lilliputian motto in *Gulliver* is "Rapio et Abfugio", the latter a form even more medieval than the plotting.) One of the showpieces – one of them – is a version of the Clive Owen/Monica Bellucci copulating gunfight from 2007's *Shoot 'Em Up*, only this time in 3D slo-mo and with a pint of bourbon in his spare hand. Everyone in the film is a cheap blonde, even down to Cage's own latest tonsorial wackjob, and the dialogue includes stuff like "Soon the hounds of perdition will howl at our command!" and "The fire isn't the worst part. It's the *video feed* ... Being burned in hell is nothing, not compared to watching your daughter's head being torn off." Amen to that, I dare say.

BLACK STATIC

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